While You Were Sleeping

by Trinket2018

Summary

Daniel is worth a bit more than a day’s wages these days, and a number of individuals plot to collect.

Notes

Adventure, Humor, Jack/Daniel Pre-Slash. SPOILERS: Set early 7th Season, pre-7-17-‘Heroes’, so Janet is alive and well. Reference to episode 7-1-‘Fallen’, 4-18-‘The Light’ & 3-7-‘Dead Man’s Switch’. Daniel NOT-whumped. Totally angst-free archeologist molestation. Exploring the geo-political (not to mention cosmo-political) ramifications of even *thinking* of being mean to our Danny. Inspired by the ‘Slavery Challenge’: to write a story with the following: Jack & Daniel involved in slavery in some way, with: plot, 1 leather boot, pixie sticks, snowman, suffocation, duct tape, evolving breakfast leftovers, tonic water, something furry like a gerbil or fuzzy bunny slippers, bottle of perfume, brick; bonus points for most creative use of lube in a non-sexual manner. DISCLAIMER: Stargate SG-1, the characters and universe are the property of Kawoosh Productions, Showtime/Viacom, Sony/MGM/UA, Double Secret Productions, Gekko Productions and the Sci-Fi Channel. No copyright infringement is intended. I have absolutely no right to be playing with them or their universe. I just gotta. I promise to get nothing out of it but personal satisfaction. RATING: NC-17 for profanity, violence & consensual m/m. WARNINGS: Slavery. Threatened non-consensual m/m.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“Well?” the Dealer demanded impatiently. “Do not waste my time.”

The Broker gave a bow and a scrape and a sly smile. “I have an Item I am sure will… intrigue you. Well worth the investment of a few moments.”

The Dealer merely stood, tapping her foot. She knew the Broker of old. If left to himself, he would spend hours extolling the scent of his merchandise before he ever got round to revealing the actual goods. However, she did, indeed, have time, business being wretchedly slow of late. Part of that was caused by the incursions of the Goa’uld on the Pyxyr Empire, bringing financial hardship and pressure on those able to afford luxury merchandise like her own. But mostly the depression in her business had to be due to the growing social resistance to the Trade, resulting in more and more stringent controls and restrictions. But, if the Broker had anything worth the looking, she was impatient to see it and judge for herself.

At last, the Dealer nodded, and led the way through her display-room. The walls were hidden behind matte black curtains, the better to show off the various hologram displays to potential customers. But no customers stood to admire her wares. She led the Broker to one of the inactive pedestals, and invited him to use it with a gesture.

The Broker smiled the wider. He knew the Dealer of old. If she was in a mind to buy, she would buy, no matter what he had to say, merely adjusting her offer according to the resale price she considered she might get, based on her amazingly accurate appraisal of the goods. So he curtailed his usual dance for the customer. In this case, he was not overly concerned. Not with what he had to show. He stepped forward, pulled a small black case from under his robe, opened it and took the small amethyst-colored crystal to insert in the pedestal receptacle.

At once, the pedestal base lit and a hologram spun up, misty shreds of color weaving in and out, resolving and solidifying into a figure, humanoid, life-size, male, kneeling and wearing bizarre clothing, ghastly great blotches of drab colors, bagging and obscuring every part of his body but for the face and hands. He was engrossed in something, intently staring at a point in space somewhere before him, his hands gripping tight to a notebook and a writing implement. The hologram revolved very slowly, even as the figure moved, scribbling in his book.

The Dealer considered the figure, almost comical in its lack of any overtly ‘intriguing’ qualities. Those clothes! That ridiculous floppy-brimmed hat, the tie string under the chin… even the odd glass lenses perched on the hologram’s nose and sliding precariously lower. But still… oddly enchanting. And a writing implement… how quaint. She gave the Broker a neutral glance, one eyebrow lifted, to see him grinning at her, holding up his hand.

“You must be patient, my dear Amindara. It will be worth the wait, I promise you.”

The Dealer made a ‘hmm’ sound, having assumed as much already, and returned to her study of the image.

Suddenly, the ludicrous hat was swept away into mist, and the hologram’s head came up, amazingly blue eyes wide and startled behind the glass circles. Invisible fingers pushed the wire frames up on the straight nose, and the expression on the – frankly – beautiful face was petulant.
Pale skin, straight nose, full pouting lips, firm (if not stubborn) jaw line, soft brown hair, expressive arched eyebrows and eyes… ah, those eyes. Narrowing now as the perfect, soft lips opened on unheard words. Many words. Very many words. Protests, evidently, as invisible hands swept away the glasses and left those blue, blue eyes naked and defenseless, opening wide as the eyebrows rose higher.

With difficulty, Amindara resisted the impulse to reach forward and stroke the short-cut hair that looked so soft and fine, but was only an illusion of light emitted from her display pedestal. But when the image swallowed and licked its lips to inviting moistness… so did she.

A soft chuckle behind her brought her head snapping around to face the Broker.

“Intrigued yet, my dear Amindara?”

“Where did you get this, Varadin?” she inquired, gesturing vaguely. “He looks humanoid… almost human. But the clothes, the lenses on his eyes, the utensil he writes with… these are all remarkably unsophisticated, primitive even, and unfamiliar to me.”

“Ah, now you cannot expect me to reveal my source until after we have come to agreement. To tell my secrets too early is against all the rules of negotiation. Perhaps now is the moment to mention the image is copy-protected, and, of course, unique.”

“You’ve shown it to others?”

“You are the first. If we can reach agreement, the only.”

“Provenance? I must be assured of proper legitimate provenance, Varadin.”

Varadin bowed acknowledgement. “You will be *fully* satisfied,” he assured Amindara, with something in his tone catching her suspicion-laden attention. He was looking at the image, his own dark eyes wide and fascinated. Intent. Repeated viewings of his crystal had obviously not dulled his own… interest.

Amindara returned to her intent study of the hologram.

Token complaints still issued from those remarkable pouting lips, but were obviously mere disjointed partial sentences. The notebook and writing utensil had been dropped, lost out of range of the recording, and, judging by the wrinkles in the shoulders of his garments, his unseen companion was pulling him to his feet, leaning him against a wall and pinning him there. The overgarment was pushed back off wide shoulders, revealing a body-hugging covering over his torso of soft, black material that ended half-way down corded arms and circled the strong white column of his neck. A slender body, but nicely defined. Perfectly defined, in fact, Amindara thought, her temperature rising as the unseen hands pulled the black fabric free of the cinch at his waist, and swept it up, over his head in a single smooth movement, ruffling his hair into (she was forced to admit this) adorable disarray.

Pale, perfect skin beneath, smooth, only a few dark blonde hairs low on his belly trailing a line downward. But even now the cinch was undoing itself, pulling away, buttons undone, metal-toothed device lowered with an impatient jerk, pocket in the white cloth underneath belling out, until the panel opened and…

“Ah!” Amindara sighed and gulped. Her eyes darted to Varadin, who only nodded in wry sympathy and echoed her sigh. In order to retrieve some semblance of professionalism before the Broker, she swallowed and said around a dry mouth, “He is human, then. I had wondered.”
The image quivered and bucked with his hips as his unseen partner took him firmly. Then he seemed to pant and swallow, shuddering against the imagined wall, hands flat to it either side of his hips as he gasped, eyes tight shut. The baggy, drab pants and white undergarment were pushed down off long, long legs, and he obviously required assistance to lift one foot, then the other, and so release the clothing to the ether. All that was left to cover this glorious body were boots – big, ugly, clunky boots with some complex strings to tie them in place… but these, too, were worked off and away from long, elegant feet, as beautiful and perfect as the rest.

Amindara took a deep, calming breath.

“Hold!” she begged, and the image froze in place. The image bore a navel, low on the belly. That was surprising. Enthralling. Endearing. A navel meant many things – humanity, experience of birth, a mother… Some races had done away with these things. Even the Pyxyr had no time and effort to waste on it with certain classes… Which put this Item into an unusual, and rare, category.

The hologram hands had reached out to gently frame a head, long elegant fingers tenderly caressing a face, and his eyes had opened wide and looked down with an expression of surprise, gratitude, yearning, anticipation, arousal, and… something soft, warm and joyous. The slowly revolving figure stood perfectly naked, flushed and hard and perfectly rampant, perfectly… perfect.

“Exquisite,” she murmured.

“You are too impatient,” Varadin chided and gave the command, “Resume.”

The image quivered, his chest rising and falling, laboring like a bellows to claw at the air as the blood flushed through him and roared down to his engorged shaft. His belly muscles trembled and flexed as if to meet a hand or a mouth sweeping over them. His own mouth opened on praises, imprecations, exhortations, pleas. The eyes shut tight again and his head tilted back, the long column of white throat bared in anguished surrender and absolute trust. Even his buttock cheeks flexed and dimpled as he squirmed and convulsed in his lover’s hold. Whoever the excised other was, they seemed bent on divine torture, dragging out the beautiful image’s ecstasy, stopping just short of release time and again. Then, the image spun in place, face to the supporting assumed wall, legs spread, hands braced at his shoulders. His head tossed back and forth as finger-dents appeared in those heaving flanks, pulling the cheeks apart…

Amindara could only gulp in surprise, not at all astonished to see the ecstatic protest on those beautiful lips. His lover was evidently experienced and talented, and fearless in appreciation of this glorious body. She envied them both. Amindara glanced at Varadin, and saw he was as enthralled in the image, in the captured moment, as the hologram itself. His hands buried beneath his robe in a highly suggestive way… Amindara considered that and with an effort – a great effort – fought to retain her critical faculties as she inspected the image.

The poor beauty was convulsing now in the throes of his passion, still a malleable toy in the grip of his lover as he was twisted back around. But now the focus of all the pleasurable experience had returned to what must be a painfully erect penis. The image’s long-fingered hands had reached to grip an assumed head, holding it just there where he most needed it to be. The glistening of moisture coated, clung to the length of the shaft, short, quick, rhythmic pulls. The image shuddered, writhing against his wall, slitted eyes molten with heat. Then, with a gasp and a red-faced expression of torment, he seemed to try to push his lover away, mouth gulping on a warning, a plea. But the unseen other would not be pushed, seemed to hold the tighter, and the image arched his back, mouth open on a cry, and at long last… slow, extended, pulsing release.

The boy – impossible to judge age for this beautiful creature, though the body was fully mature he was young, young in experience in this manner of physical loving, young in his joy and
enthusiasm, young in the way he could give his all, yield absolutely to the moment – sighed and slid down his wall to land with what Amindara could swear she heard as a thump. Now he looked up, eyes wide, almost black, expression infused with adoration.

Amindara felt the prickle of suspicion. Something so rare and fine, placed within her grasp… why did she believe it couldn’t be so easy? “I’ve never seen its like on the market before. And I would have heard. Something like this… I would definitely have heard.”

The Broker, with some difficulty, tore his attention from the image. “No, this Item has never been on the market before. An estate sale. An old family reduced to selling off its most prized assets,” he explained briefly, negligently. “But wait. You’ll miss the best.”

The hologram reached out and around, arms wrapping about a body now evidently standing before him, straddling his wantonly sprawled form. His sensitive fingers fumbled a little as he delved at something a breath from his face, then caressed and shaped… what could only be the penis of his obviously male lover.

Generous, even extravagant kisses and licks were lavished on the unseen member, until the image opened those luscious lips and swallowed. Cheeks blew in and out as he sucked hard, head and body surging easily back and forward to accommodate violent thrusts, Adam’s apple surging up and down as he swallowed.

Understandably, his lover had no strength left for standing in the aftermath of orgasm. The image opened arms in an embrace, pressing against his lips and again, lips opened as his tongue writhed. And then his head fell forward against an absent shoulder, he rubbed his cheek with another, devastatingly beautiful in the tender lingering moment of fulfillment, sweet tears of gratitude sparkling on his long lashes… languorous eyes opened, shining, brilliant… and then… Amindara could only suck in air, shock holding her riveted.

“Yes…” Varadin sighed deeply. “That smile. Worth any price, wouldn’t you say my dear, my very dear Amindara?”

For those who believed in it, that look might be named… love.

Amindara simply could not help herself. She reached out for that soft, smooth cheek… then she sighed as the recording reset and the image knelt again, hard at work in its foolish hat and ugly clothes, oblivious to all else, innocent and ignorant once more of the carnal joy it would soon experience.

Slowly, the Dealer returned to herself. She hardened, facing the Broker with a scowl. “Why bring this to me?”

“My dear Amindara, you have ever been my best customer—“

“Enough flattery. I have no patience for it. You know my resources as well – better – than I do. You know I cannot hope to raise the price for an Item so… so exquisite. Certainly not anything like its true worth. So I ask again. Why bring it to me?”

Varadin seemed at a loss for a moment.

Amindara pushed, “You don’t actually have possession of the Item, do you?”

“Not… as such. But I can get it. With your assistance. I lost my own transport in the Iszan disaster, as you well know. I do require your resources to complete the acquisition of the Item. I offer a third
of the sale price if you will help me.”

Amindara considered that, attention once again torn between professionalism and the lure of the image as he lost hat, glasses, clothing… “Only a third?”

“All I know where and how the Item may be… retrieved. All I need is off-world transport. Third is fair. And consider what a third of the value of this Item… could be.”

She shook her head, hoping to clear it of the sudden swell of lust and greed that flooded through her at the thought of possessing, for even a short time, an Item so… fine. And reason returned abruptly on a cold realization.

“You don’t have provenance, do you? No rights of ownership whatsoever. Estate sale his left buttock…” even as that exemplary piece of the image’s anatomy was revealed. “Do you know the trouble this could bring? Valuable or not… The authorities are most strict lately. Only yesterday, a dealer was executed for improper ethics in the Trade. Three more await appeals. Another half-dozen have been bankrupted by heavy fines in the past season alone. I will not join their number. Who is he, Varadin? Is he even slave-class?”

“Not slave, perhaps…”

“Are you mad! Do you *want* to get us both hung in the Capitol?”

“This Item falls well within the Trade Ethics Regulations.”

“In what way, ‘within’?”

“He belongs to a race called the Tau’ri. Human. Rumor has it the Tau’ri are the original Goa’uld humanoid host race. A subject race of an enemy power, and so included in Article Thirteen of the Trade Regulations, specifying legitimate Trade Merchandise. Ours, Amindara, for the taking.”

“Even so, we would have to go before the Board of Review, allow him to speak in his own defense to plead exclusion from the Trade.”

“Not… if we can complete the transaction that passes him to his new owner.”

“New owner?”

“I have a buyer already, Amindara. The contact who brought me this recording, and the information I need to acquire the Item, has also identified the buyer who wants the Item. Wants it badly. I did not approach this contact! The contact approached me. All I need is five days, and off-world transport. The acquisition and the transfer of ownership will all take place well outside the Pyxxyr sphere of influence. And if only we two know of this venture, how can the laws touch us? Think, just think of the wealth that could be ours… Five days, Amindara, that’s all I need. If you are fearful, you need not even come. I can complete the acquisition and the transfer, and return your ship to you inside ten days. For one full third. Non taxable, at that!”

“I must think on this.”

“There is a time limit. I must be on Androsi within the next five days to complete the acquisition.”

“Androsi? Isn’t that in an old Goa’uld province? And it has an Ancients’ Portal. But there’s nothing there but ruins.”

“Precisely. Will you join me in this venture? Or do I approach one of your less-squeamish
competitors?"

Her eyes were dragged back to the image as he slumped back against his wall, sated and smiling…

“No. No… I will join you. I can have my ship prepped and ready in three hours.”

The Broker nodded. “I will need to bring three of my people to… assist.”

The Dealer looked at him very hard. “Not Cob.”

“Cob’s loyalty to me is unquestioned, and he has great skill—“

“Too much loyalty, too much zeal. Not Cob. He has been known to damage merchandise in his excess of zeal and limit of brain.”

The Broker held up his hands. “As you wish! But I will still need muscle. And if you have any stixs available…? They would come in most useful.”

The Dealer nodded. “This is not my first wild hunt, Varadin. I know what is needed. Meet me at my hangar in three hours. Oh, and… the record crystal…”

Varadin smiled widely. “This one you may keep, my dear partner. I have another.”

“Unique, you said.”

Varadin shrugged. “The only other one. And very private. Not for sale. I knew you would want one. I knew you would no more be able to resist keeping this… than I.”

Amindara ignored the smug sound of the Broker’s voice. She reached out to take the precious amethyst from the receptacle, the image blinked out, and she held the warm round jewel in her hand, seeing his eyes, his lips, his smile…

Amindara watched Varadin leave her shop, her eyes narrowed. It wasn’t that she distrusted him. Within certain narrow bounds, she knew from experience she could trust him absolutely. And outside of those bounds, she was sure of his actions and reactions, his range of behavior and patterns of thought – enough to be certain what he would do in most cases. So it wasn’t a matter of trust that had her signaling to her assistant.

Mar appeared instantly to her gesture. He was human, tall, slender, fair of skin with light grey eyes and white-blonde hair. He might even have been called beautiful, almost as beautiful as the image on the crystal, if not for the pronounced limp with which he lurched as best he could, and the terrible burn-whorls scarring the right side of his face. His hair had never grown back in on that side of his head, either. Because of this, he was un-salable. But he had proven himself valuable in other ways, so now he wore the collar with the Dealer’s sigil, and her livery.

“Mistress?”

“We have a trip in store for us, Mar. Have Fin prep the ship for a twenty-day journey, with full support for ten passengers. We depart in three hours. You and Fin will accompany me. And have Cal and Bon meet us.”

Mar’s eyes opened a little wider, but he said nothing, merely nodded and limped lop-sidedly away to set all in motion.

That vurmer Varadin was going to bring Cob. She thought of the beautiful shining face of the
hologram, with Mar’s scars spoiling and twisting that wondrous smile… and she just knew he was going to bring Cob, the cold prickle of unease coursing down her spine. She just knew…
Amindara’s staff consisted of slaves who were, for one reason or another, un-salable, yet still of great use to her.

Like Mar, whose original beauty had been irrevocably destroyed. The resulting cellular damage and residual radiation had also rendered him un-clonable. Such a pity -- such a waste. Except that he had then revealed a remarkable talent for organization and excelled at managing any concern Amindara had set him.

Then there was Fin, her pilot. A grafting experiment at the replication centre had gone terribly wrong, leaving him with two extremely useful additional appendages, but a mule -- sterile and incapable of cloning true. The two tentacles sickened and repulsed most people. Amindara had grown used to them, even deeply appreciative and fond of them, as she knew just how valuable they really were to an inter-stellar pilot of quite astonishing skill. All Amindara had done was put him at the controls of her little craft, the Marmoset. He had done the rest. He had learned not just the controls and the intricacies of navigation, but had learned to know and love every bolt and rivet in the craft, had tinkered to greatly enhance speed, efficiency, safety and maneuverability, added a defense and weapons system that had repulsed and destroyed pirates, competitors, and even the occasional Goa’uld scout that had blundered into their path.

As for Cal and Bon, they were big and not especially bright, and not even passably pretty, unprepossessing in the extreme. But they were totally and abjectly loyal and obedient to her for saving them from being sloughed off to a mine somewhere with the other amassed lots of slaves not deemed suitable for personal service here at the heart of the Pyxyr Empire. The two men did a superlative job of intimidating anyone who dared approach her without her leave, spoke roughly or dared to threaten her, and they were quite useful in a wild hunt such as this, a certain native shrewdness in savage places emerging in both. With Mar to lead them, they could sometimes be inspired. Mar had the knack for explaining slowly and clearly, exactly what they needed to do and how they needed to do it, and with such instruction, they could always be depended upon to complete their assigned tasks, or would die in the attempt.

As soon as she arrived at the hangar, she found her worst fears confirmed: Varadin had indeed brought Cob with him, along with two other big, stupid, strong-looking specimens in Varadin’s collars and livery. She glanced at her slave Mar, but he stood passive, submissive and unresponsive, at her side.

She never did know what he was really thinking or feeling. She had never before bothered to question, for he had fulfilled his duties to her satisfaction. But now, she wondered.

“Mar. Cob will be on board ship with us for this venture. Will this affect your ability to carry out your responsibilities?”

“No Mistress,” said the soft voice, but the wolf-pale eyes did not look in the direction of either his mistress, or Varadin’s prime enforcer; the man who had raided his village in a wild hunt ten years before, stole him from his backward – but free – tribe to live in slavery for the rest of his life. The man who had raped, disfigured and crippled him when he fought too hard to escape and return home. At least, that had always been Cob’s side of the tale, and if anyone had ever asked Mar his, he would not have been believed in any case...
“Mar. I wish you to make it clear to Cal and Bon that once we have obtained the Item we go to seek, it will be their responsibility to ensure that no one approaches him except for me. No one. Until he is delivered to the purchaser. You understand?”

Now Mar turned to face her, met her eyes, his own bleak, desolate, full of despair, pain and resolution. “Yes, Mistress,” was all he said.

Amindara nodded, and with her assistant, boarded the Marmoset, giving the order for Fin to prep for departure, then turned to direct Varadin to his assigned quarters. His staff, of course, would share the slave barracks with her own servants. Then she sighed as she joined Fin in the control cabin, wondering just how awkward this venture would become.

“Set course for Androsi, Fin. Reasonable speed, but do not waste more time than is needful getting us there. I wish this venture concluded as quickly as possible.”

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Androsi was in winter season at the latitude of the Ancients’ Portal. The deciduous trees were nude of leaves, but the many evergreens afforded adequate cover. Snow lay thick on the ground, but the party were supplied with two-man hover sleds to prevent them leaving any evidence of tracks. Amindara’s ship, the Marmoset, had settled to stationary position some hours ago, just above the target camp, fully cloaked and carefully detailing every piece of information gleaned by the craft’s extensive sensor systems.

There had been ten alien humans – Tau’ri – at first. Then six had departed, back through the Ancients’ Portal, leaving four, the Item among them. Varadin, fearful that the Item would escape, had argued for an immediate strike. Amindara had refused. There would be a better time, when all four were not gathered so tight together, all within sight of each other. Then the aliens had begun to play in the snow… It was too good an opportunity, and Amindara took more hologram imprints of the Item at play.

The Item was truly beautiful, even in the ugly baggy clothes, colored white this time to blend against the snow, his smile and laughter shining out. So sweet he was, rolling three large balls of snow into a stacked pile. So endearing, grinning as he perched his hat on top of the rude snow statue. So very erotic with his cheeks glowing red as he draped his arm around it and pretended to hug the vaguely humanoid shape, while gazing shyly at his companions, who were taking some sort of visual records of their own.

There was some discussion of taking all, but, again, Amindara objected. Of the other three, one was female and comely though not young enough to be prime, the large one was jaffa, the last fit and comely but far too old to take in a wild hunt. For the target Item, they had a buyer and the odds favored them successfully circumventing Pyxyr law in its sale. They had no such guarantee with these others.

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“Welcome to P4C 918,” grumbled the leader of SG1, the flagship team of the Star Gate Command facility, hunching deeper into his ice-issue BDU’s. “Butt-hole of the universe. Colder than a witch’s tits. Come on, Daniel. Aren’t you cold? A desert rat like you, you’ve got to be freezin’ your buns off by now. You’ve been squatting in that snow bank for an hour.”

“Just a moment, Jack… just want to get this last piece…”

“That’s what you said an hour ago,” protested Colonel Jack O’Neill, officer and gentleman in the
United States Air Force, ex Special Ops, ex fighter jockey, sometime intergalactic explorer, diplomat, savior of Earth and all-round-hero, currently archeologist-sitter and Mother Hen.

“You’ve got it all on tape. Come on. Take a break. I’ll fix you up a hot toddy. Managed to sneak a little something in my pack when I saw how cold it was over the MALP.”

“Oh. Um… no thanks. I’m sticking to tonic water,” replied Dr. Daniel Jackson, with PhD’s in archeology and linguistics, Masters in anthropology, minor in obtuse civilian handling of annoying military escorts.

“Daniel? Why?”

“Alcohol doesn’t seem to agree with me,” the archeologist confessed. It could have been a blush in his pale cheeks, or just the effect of the cold reddening them. He looked up momentarily, three vertical lines of thoughtfulness appearing on the ridge over his nose. “At least… I’m not sure if it ever did, I can’t really remember, but since I… you know… Descended… alcohol just doesn’t agree with me.”

And that was as much time and effort as Daniel was willing to spare from his work. Jack sighed heavily, wondering what it would take to get the guy to quit for half an hour.

The man does not change.

Jack distinctly remembered thinking that before, saying it before, on many occasions, with just that same suppressed note of exasperation. He watched the archeologist, bent over a half-buried chunk of rock on which the faintest of carvings was still visible, thrilled to little tiny bits by finding half a word here, half an image there. No, Dr. Daniel Jackson hadn’t been changed after a year of marriage on Abydos, nor by five years adventuring through the Star Gate, looking for his lost wife, looking for her lost son, then… what the hell had he been looking for that last year or so? He hadn’t been changed by this past year, either, apparently, a year spent dead for tax reasons, as a glowy ascended being zipping about the galaxy with Oma Desala.

You’d think he’d be over the “Gosh Wow” stuff. You’d think he’d be sick and tired of half-forgotten remnants of a culture seen only in fragments, knitted together with nothing more than the wildest of speculation. But no. There he was, on his knees, engrossed. By a wall. Not even a whole wall. No. Just a tiny little chunk of a wall, for cryin’ out loud.

Daniel was absolutely absorbed, focused entirely on that crumbly, shattered little bit of brick and mortar. It fascinated, mystified, always irritated Jack that the man could bury himself so deep in his work. A squad of Jaffa could show up and Daniel might not notice. The one advantage to Jack of this intense level of concentration was that Jack was free to look his fill. Drink in the sight, the scent, the sound of Daniel. Could, in fact, eat his love-lorn heart out.

And, suddenly, a disorienting, dizzying wave of déjà vu swept over him… of seeing Daniel kneeling in front of another wall…

Jesus. Talk about déjà vu. Just like the last time. The last first time. The Goa’uld Pleasure Palace. Where he and Daniel and Carter and teenager Loren had all been stuck until slow withdrawal from an alien light-show device left their heads straight again. Daniel had been just as focused – no, more so. Jack knew why, knew exactly what it was, because it had been eating him inside too. The thought of Daniel, standing on his twelfth story balcony, prepared to jump.

Daniel had been desperate to shut down everything but the work, afraid of what might creep into his head if he left any room that wasn’t work. Jack was terrified of it too. So when Daniel had
amazingly mapped the entire Palace, filmed every fucking centimeter of every wall, and they were still going to be stuck another week, he had decided to start on the outside.

Outside? No frickin’ way! That was Jack’s response. Outside was beyond the range of what was left of the damn Light machine. Outside was within sight of the alien sea. Outside was where Loren’s parents had done one better on a twelfth story balcony, and gone for an eternal swim. If Daniel got away from them out there…

One solid hour of argument, loud, abrasive, two weeks of cabin fever and no privacy and living way too much in everyone else’s pockets, close-to-too-far argument, and then Jack had caved. But with a compromise. Daniel would go outside, but under Jack’s personal supervision.

Daniel had put on his glasses, his jacket, his boonie, picked up notebook, pen and recorder, and marched right out. Jack, trailing along behind, watching his six, going demented over his six, had realized before they got to the first wall that coming outside meant that he and Daniel were, de facto, alone for the first time in weeks. And where Daniel chose to kneel to begin his work, well out of ear-shot and visual range of Carter, the kid, and the team of Tok’ra scientists who had arrived at the end of the second week of their detox to check out the place, and at least gave them all a break from each other, although it made the whole experience just a tad on the crowded side…

Forget even what privacy they had had with the kid around needing so much reassurance and support… But then, finally, in this little expedition of Daniel’s, it was just the two of them.

Alone.

It was too much. Nerves too raw, emotions too scraped and twanging, having come so close to losing Daniel for good, not once but twice… on the balcony and in the gateroom where he had gone flat-line… Jack just couldn’t, couldn’t take one more second of it.

He had fallen on Daniel with all the finesse of a bulldozer. Stripped him, shoved him back to the wall, knelt and claimed his cock with his mouth, went nuts and never stopped, never listened, never heard Daniel’s half-hearted protests or attempts to be reasonable, rational, never heard his pleas and prayers, heard only the tone, changing from snarky to startled, to alarmed, to breathless, to sultry, to demanding, to sated. And after that there hadn’t been any words at all, just soft, little moans and hums.

And when he had been capable of rational discourse again? What had Daniel said?

“God, Jack, I’ve waited so long for you to wake up and smell the coffee… so long… I love you.”

His mouth had said it, but his eyes and smile had made Jack believe it. It had warmed him through, warmed as nothing had since Charlie… since Charlie… and when the time came to say it back, Jack choked. He felt it, and Daniel knew he did, but he just couldn’t say it. But Daniel was a patient man, an understanding and forgiving man, willing to wait. Cutting Jack all the slack he needed. Because the love was there, spoken aloud or not.

But that had been before… that had been a Daniel with a full set of working memories, a Daniel fully aware of all the history that had divided, melded, and finally forged them into lovers. That had been a Daniel who had stood a hell of a lot of shit from Jack after that; insecure, macho, juvenile bull-shit, all of it, before Jack finally succeeded in going too far, even for Daniel, made Daniel doubt that that all-important L-Word Jack had never said was the truth in his heart.

They had argued before, broken up before, cut each other to the quick before… but not like that last time, after Reese. That last time had had the unmistakable dead-flower funereal smell of the irrevocable. And even though it had just about killed Jack, pride and hurt and bloody-mindedness
had kept him aloof. He had just about admitted to himself that he couldn’t stand it any longer, that he would have to go crawling to Daniel and beg him, beg him to forgive… just one more time… and finally, finally, confess to the truth, that love was there, beating with every pulse of his heart, and it scared him shitless. It was the one thing he knew would bring Daniel back into his arms, no matter what else lay between them. He had planned to corner Daniel and say it just as soon as they came back from Kelowna…

But it was already too late. Way, way too late, even to make things good between them before…

Daniel didn’t remember that, either, thank God. What a perfect bastard Jack had been. Denying him even a hint of comfort as he lay helpless in that Infirmary bed, dissolving down to blood and pain. Unable to bridge the chasm between them because it just hurt so damned much.

That ascended bitch Oma… what he wouldn’t do to her if he ever got the chance… after taking Daniel away, after keeping him for a year, she gave Daniel back, all right, but kept back his memories. Slapped them right back to start, in fact.

Jesus… it had taken Jack four years to work up the nerve to make his move the first time… five years if you count from their first mission. Personally, Jack didn’t count it. They’d been totally different people then. He’d been buried so deep in his own shit he hadn’t even seen Daniel until the dweeb got in his face – or rather, got between his face and the staff weapon blast that was supposed to sort out his problems for him – much like the Mark IV tactical nuke was supposed to do. Daniel had neatly disarmed him of both, left him with nothing to do but deal. How he had hated and resented the little shit for that… for dying in his place. Then for not dying. Then for not being the weak dweeb he was supposed to be, for not allowing Jack to intimidate the hell out of him, push him back to his place as mission comic relief. Then for daring to tell him the truth, straight out, to his face.

Daniel was just too damned good at the self-sacrifice thing. Way too eager to throw himself into the breech, saving people from themselves, and they never, ever thanked him for it. Jack had never… He couldn’t believe, when he was a guest of Baal, that Daniel would stand by and let him… Couldn’t believe it. After the short and violent fury at Daniel for even appearing to allow it, refusing to do the big honkin’ Oma lightning-bolt thing and blast the bastards to ashes, Jack had finally thought about it and… Still hadn’t believed Daniel could leave him there in the shit, stand by and watch and do nothing at all. Was sure now, in the teeth of all evidence to the contrary, that somehow, Daniel had engineered his escape. And that was only because Jack had refused the one thing Daniel could offer him free and clear and well within the rules…

Jack hadn’t realized until much later, after the physical pain had gone, after the withdrawal ache had ceased, when he had finally got his head straight, what Daniel had really offered. Not ascension per se… it had been a plea. Jack hadn’t heard it. “Come with me, Jack. Come with me.” And he had said no.

As for Abydos… no frickin’ wonder Daniel had been de-ascended over that shit. The amazing thing was those self-righteous, more-ascended-than-thou bastard Others hadn’t turned Daniel’s glowy butt off and left him to fade into nothing. Because he just had to do it again, didn’t he? Step in the way and get himself blasted instead… How Oma ever thought Daniel, Daniel of all people in the universe, would make a good Ascended Being, standing by while all hell overtook the helpless and innocent of the universe… Even Jack knew that just would not happen. Couldn’t. Not for long, anyway.

It still confused Jack a little, trying to figure out what Daniel remembered and what he didn’t from before he was De-Ascended. As Daniel explained to Jack, he had only got one or two flashes of his
glowy self, and that did not include Baal or Abydos. Some of what was missing from his pre-
Ascension days had come back, but by no means all of it. And although he struggled to be grateful
that Oma Desala and the Others had left him anything at all… It had been tough on the guy, trying
to find his feet again, trying to pick up on relationships that were brand new to him… getting hit
from time to time with some traumatic memory and all the pain around it… like finding, loving and
losing Sha’re all over again, all at once. And as for more recent stuff… Gone. And if it wasn’t
back by now, Jack figured it wasn’t coming back. Which could be good or bad, depending…

When Daniel himself realized he would always be missing something, it had sent him into a bit of
a tail-spin. He refused to entertain even the suggestion that Mackenzie might help – well, duh. So
Jack, his best friend and team leader, took him out and got him thoroughly drunk, and just let him
talk it out.

Daniel had explained it to him. His languages, and his job, that he remembered. He said he could
remember everything he had ever read, and most of what he had written. But the personal stuff…
that was swiss cheese. It was as though his life before had been reduced to episodes in a TV show:
a week of real life boiled down to a one hour episode, hitting just the high-points, just-the-facts-ma’am, or forty-five minutes less commercials and credits. So he remembered missions, the
problems and solutions, just not the stuff that might have been between the scenes. He had no idea,
for instance, where his bathroom had been in the two or three apartments he had lived in before,
and wasn’t real sure how to get from the living room to the bedroom in most. Come to think of it,
he hadn’t been able to find a bathroom under Cheyenne Mountain, either, or map a route from his
office to the commissary. He could only remember one team night out with SG1… probably
because it had ended in a bar-brawl, so… He couldn’t remember owning even one car, although he
did remember Jack’s Explorer and Sam’s three or four classic sports jobs, and had a dim memory
of perching on the back of her Harley, planning out his will. He couldn’t find a coffee shop,
grocery store, bookstore or gas station in Colorado Springs to save his soul. Did they even have a
mall? They had to, didn’t they?

“You stopped calling me Danny. Why?” he had asked.

“No I didn’t.”

“But… after we met the Gamekeeper, I only remember once or twice…”

“That’s just what you remember, Danny. I didn’t stop. Maybe I didn’t do it so much in public…
you’ve always been kind of sensitive about the name. It’s what your parents called you. It was for
family. For private. Not for work. And it didn’t sound… respectful, at work. Actually, it was
General Hammond who dressed me down about that. He always calls you Dr. Jackson. Out of
respect. Always.”

Daniel had smiled at that. “Or son. Sometimes he calls me son.”

After that, Daniel had seemed better. As if he had come to terms with what he remembered,
accepted the loss of what he didn’t, was prepared to move ahead.

Once he was sufficiently drunk, Jack asked him cautiously, what he remembered of what happened
on P4X 347. He had winced. Basically, he remembered the Light, the addiction, a passing
impression of yelling at the General, then of being on his balcony… and Jack calling him back. He
had no clue why he’d gone out there in the first place, and wasn’t sure he wanted to know. Chalk it
up to manic withdrawal and let it go. Then just bits and pieces of the three weeks of de-tox in the
Goa’uld Pleasure Palace. He remembered every inscription he had filmed, inside and out, and
talking to the Tok’ra who had come to study what he’d discovered. That was it.
So, Jack filled in the blanks for himself (if not for Daniel), his lover had no memory of their first time together. And since they had formed a “no sex on missions” and “no sex off-world” rule after almost being caught by Anise on their last day at the Pleasure Palace… the shreds Daniel had left wouldn’t include any of their times together. Not the good times, or the bad. And if the archaeologist was a little mystified about his reactions after the whole Reese debacle… well, what he remembered about Reese was bad enough to account for most of the emotional fall-out afterwards. There was really no need to drag in an acrimonious and painful break-up to justify the coolness between them.

So… back to square one. Back to Daniel being blithely unaware that Jack felt anything more than a comfortable friendship and team-bonded thing for him, colored by a mildly exasperated and indulgent fondness. Perhaps a touch of paternal over-protectiveness. But certainly not the mad-bad-obsessive-repressive-possessive-scary-alpha-male-apex-predator-stalker insanity that made Jack want to howl at the moon, make him want to grow fangs and claws and take Daniel down, pinned and struggling, wriggling beneath him, while he claimed his prey with slavering kisses and growling threats to be still and take it, and finally, finally, eat him alive.

Jack took a long, shuddering sigh and backed off, hoping the frigid air of Androsi would cool him down. Silly him.

When they found Daniel again on Vis Uban, miraculously alive and well, but so lost, adrift, no recollections of his life… it had been like a second chance. Until it became clear some memories would return. Some. Maybe all? Could Jack remind Daniel of their love, and risk him ever, ever finding out about the rest? The denial, the word withheld, the death of love? Afraid to risk it, still terrified of his own feelings, how deep they were, how vulnerable it made him, Jack had held back, uncertain, trying to make amends for crimes Daniel didn’t recall, Jack letting himself settle for being the supportive, caring friend Daniel needed, rather than the lover he so patently wasn’t ready for… might never be ready for…

And, amidst all of the other complicated mess of feelings, there was just that worm of doubt… If their passion, their love had been at all important to Daniel, he would have remembered. So maybe… just maybe… it wasn’t important to him after all. Maybe whatever they had had was dead and gone long before Daniel left him for all that Oma could offer.

So now what was he supposed to do? When he only had to look at this innocent, enthused, focused, totally oblivious, utterly beautiful man, to feel his whole body roar with want and need and hunger and…

Jack had just about admitted to himself that he couldn’t stand it any longer, that he would have to say something, make some kind of move… planned to do it as soon as they got back from Androsi… momentarily caught by the next, even stronger frisson of déjà vu: he’d said the same thing to himself just before Kelowna… that made him feel suddenly nauseous with dread…

Jack snapped his P90 into a suddenly tense grip, every sense jangling, craning his ears into the heavily muffled, deadened silence of snowfall, squinting into the white flurries, his every instinct alert and screaming at him to beware, something dangerous was out there…

Daniel, oblivious as always, muttered as he reached for his video recorder to capture the next line of text revealed beneath the layer of snow.

Fingering his radio, Jack barked out, “Carter, T. Watch your six. I think there may be something…"

And then…
The optimum moment finally came. Two, the female and the jaffa, were sent to roam the woods, while the Item and the last and oldest remained at the ruin. Even then, they waited still longer until the other two were safely distant, so that they wouldn’t interfere.

Varadin divided their resources accordingly. While Amindara remained at the ship with her pilot Fin, watching over her display monitor, Varadin took Mar, Cal and Bon, Cob and his two other men, and went hunting.

Seven against four, with the element of surprise and the low level of technology ported by the opposition, should have been more than enough. Watching from the ship, Amindara saw that Mar, Cal and Bon easily overtook the two at the ruin. Neither target had any idea there was danger until they were felled by the stix. Varadin and his men had spread out around the site, to guard against any possible interference, while Cal and Bon took possession and loaded the Item on the hover.

But something alerted the wandering two in the woods, and they raced back, in time to meet and defeat the nearest one of Varadin’s men. He went down, in an instant, dead, killed by the large jaffa’s staff weapon. With no time for the others to rush into position, the two primitives were able to block and corner Amindara’s team and the precious Item. The large jaffa fired with his Goa’uld staff weapon at their new opposition, as did the female with the ridiculously arcane projectile emitter. Primitive and ill-equipped they may have been, but they were efficient and well-trained warriors, both. While the woman effectively held the hunting party at bay, the jaffa crept near enough to kill Cal and Bon, incapacitate Mar, and recover the unconscious Item. However, in that time, Varadin and his two remaining men were able to circle around and attack them from behind. Cob engaged in hand-to-hand with the jaffa, who was almost his equal in size and strength. The woman accounted for the other of Varadin’s men and produced a zat’ni’katel to stun Varadin. However, now that it was down to Cob and the jaffa, the woman dared not fire for fear of hitting her companion. And, in any case, it appeared that the jaffa was going to win against the larger, heavier, stronger, but not nearly so motivated, Cob.

With a sigh, Amindara pulled on her warm-suit and charged her stix. Taking a hover, she silently glided to the position of the fighting and fired on the woman. It took two shots, however, to fell her. Cob was still locked in gargantuan battle with the jaffa. Until Amindara fired upon them both with the stix. And the jaffa a second time at a higher stun level. Then she settled in the snow to pick up the dross.

When a wild hunt went this badly, it was what was commonly termed in the Trade a wild funt.

First, they had lost four men, and almost the Item they had come to collect. The two aliens had resisted the stix, actually engaged their attackers, could identify their weapons, at least. This should never have happened. With the security of the Pyxyr Empire dependent upon their secrecy…

Some rumors had got out over time, but no physical evidence of any Pyxyr, their weapons or their possessions, had ever been allowed to fall into alien hands. This simple precaution had fueled most of the Trade restrictions in the past. For aliens to have witnessed so much… the directive indicated capture or elimination for them both. And given Amindara had already determined these two were un-salable…

But first, there was a valuable Item to collect, equipment and personnel to retrieve, and physical evidence to clean up. Bodies, tracks and blood in the pristine snow of Androsi.

With no choice in the matter, Amindara began the labor herself. First, she hauled the forms, equipment, weapons and visible paraphernalia aboard the lowered hovers. Then she attached
grapples to each hover, and hauled them, one by one, to the hangar deck of the Marmoset.

Drones carried the heavy, inert organic forms to the far wall, which presented a solid bank of cover plates, each sealing a container which, when activated, slid out a transparent tube, which then opened, to hold one body each. The tubes then automatically closed, retracted back into the wall even as they flooded with anesthetic gas. The default active setting on each filled containment unit was stasis. Once the bodies, living and dead, were sealed thus, they would keep for later, and more permanent disposition. The containment units of the Marmoset hangar bay were arrayed five high and twenty deep, all backing on the outer bulkhead for certain very important functional reasons, giving a maximum capacity of one hundred.

This much settled, she next took her hover to methodically attend to the removal of all physical evidence left on the planet surface. They had already observed that the Tau'ri team contacted their home-world through the Portal at set intervals, and another of these was fast approaching. Amindara only had a little time left. Leaving the woman and jaffa where they had fallen, and by the time she had completed, there was nothing to show what had occurred but a few dents in the snow, and the Item’s torn boot: nothing to show anyone but the Tau’ri exploration party had ever visited the Androsi ruins any time in living memory. Nothing save for the missing Item, that is. Amindara viewed the last Tau’ri, the older one, and the camp by the Gate. She had even picked up the bulky packs of the alien warriors, out of curiosity. Who knew? They might offer something of novelty, if not of value.

She then returned to the two aliens who had seen too much, and considered her options. And then she received communication from Fin. The Ancients’ Portal was spinning in preparation for an incoming event. Amindara ordered Fin to hold her ship in station, cloaked and silent.

No time left. She must make a decision. The lives of two aliens meant nothing to her personally, but, being in the Trade, she had every appreciation of the true value of life… in copper, silver and gold coin. It was a professional reluctance she felt, to needlessly destroy such a commodity.

Yes, they had seen too much, seen more than any other alien had been allowed to see, but it was unlikely that the woman and the jaffa had seen enough in the shadows and the snow, amongst the trees, to be any kind of threat. And without any other evidence or proofs, what could either of them say or do once the Marmoset was far, far away, safely out of the Androsi system? They could be no possible threat to Amindara, the venture, or the Pyxyr.

Leave them.

So she returned the hover to the Marmoset hangar, sealed the bay doors, then cleared the last of the mess this wild funt had created. Drones returned equipment and weapons to store, and the hovers were cleaned, refueled, and stowed. Off in one corner of the hangar bay, secured in a crash net, sat a small heap of canvas packs, a few ugly metal projectile weapons, a staff weapon, and some zat’ni’katels. Satisfied that all was settled and what remained to do could safely wait, Amindara joined Fin in the control cabin.

“More Tau’ri,” Fin reported quietly, right tentacle gesturing to the main monitor and the white-uniformed shapes revealed, moving over the snow. “Once the Portal opened, their remote mechanical drone activated, attempting to contact those already here. When no reply came to the summons, nine came through, all carrying the primitive projectile weapons. They are well trained, Mistress. Very well trained. Systematic, thorough, cautious, studying the terrain, recording, retrieving their fallen and sending them back through the Portal, while a significant force remained to conduct an intense search.”

Amindara nodded as she watched. “They value the Item.”
Fin nodded, even as his two human hands rubbed at a dry and flaking patch on his left tentacle. The appendages, while staggeringly useful, had evolved for use in salt seas, and being grafted to an air-living being was hard on the soft tissues, no matter how humid Fin kept the atmosphere in the control cabin. He spent off-duty hours soaking in a salt bath in the slave quarters.

“Orders, Mistress?”

“Let us leave this place. Set course out of the system, then hold. I will need to revive Varadin. He is the only one who knows the rendezvous coordinates. He did not place sufficient trust in our partnership agreement to reveal this important fact before we had secured the Item.”

Fin kept his countenance solemn. He was not always certain how to take the things his Mistress said, but, being a slave, it was unwise of him to react in any way than with abject obedience. So all he said was, “Yes, Mistress.”

Amindara sighed. “Proceed, then. I want to be in position to jump to the hyperspace corridor when Varadin is coherent enough to supply our destination.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

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The Dealer then made her way back to the hangar bay, barely feeling the smooth movements of the little ship turning and accelerating out of the Androsi atmosphere.

The Marmoset had been designed with the Trade in view. The fact that the hangar bay could be instantly flooded with a variety of anesthetic gases, and as quickly flushed clean, was no accident. Nor was the fact that each tube receptacle had one end facing in to the hangar bay, while the other abutted the ship’s outer bulkhead.

Amindara entered the hangar and checked the monitor readings on eight active cover plates. The first she checked held the Item. He was lying in peaceful and successful stasis, metabolically dormant with no evidence of any harm taken from the stix or the containment pod gas. On four other compartments, the monitor readings told a different tale, reflecting advanced stages of death. Cal, Bon, and two of Varadin’s slaves. Tissue damage too extensive for the med field to repair, brain degradation and blood clotting already too advanced for revivification. Which was a shame. Cal and Bon had been useful, and it would be troublesome to train replacements. None of the four were worth keeping samples for cloning.

Amindara hit the large red button on each of these four cover plates. And four bodies were instantly incinerated, the ash flushed out to space when the cover plates on the opposite ends of the tubes, against the bulkhead, opened. Then those four compartments began the automatic sterilization cycle, ready to be filled again, then shut down to inactive mode.

Mar, it was reported, was damaged, but well within the capacity of the med field to repair. Amindara was conscious of a surprising feeling of relief. The Dealer told herself it was simply the fact that he would have been all but impossible to replace. She pressed the large green button and let the machinery perform its function.

At Cob’s tube, she hesitated. Red button, or green? It would be so easy to dispose of the inconvenience, tell Varadin he had been irreparably damaged by the jaffa. But… with Cal and Bon eliminated, along with Varadin’s other muscle… if they had need of brawn, for whatever reason, on the remainder of this venture, Cob was all they had. Oh well. She pressed the green.

And the green on Varadin’s receptacle as well, which would revive him from his zat’ni’katel hit.

As each cycle completed, the cover plates swung open, the tubes extruded from the bank, and the tops retracted. Mar seemed disoriented as he emerged, a little groggy, blinking as he absorbed where he was, then bowed to his mistress. Cob also seemed a little unsteady. All Varadin had endured was the stunning effect of one zat’ni’katel blast, but he grumbled as he held a no-doubt aching head. Three compartments then closed and returned to their places, covers clicking back in place and sterilization cycles completing before the receptacles shut down.

“Well, that was a fine funt,” Varadin muttered.

“So I judge it too, my partner. You lost two men. I lost Cal and Bon. A crew of seven trained and armed men were almost routed by two primitive aliens who could have gained final proof of Pyxyr existence. A funt indeed. I did, however, secure the Item.”

“Where!” the Broker demanded, thrilled, ignoring the small detail of slave death.
Amindara pressed the latch on the sole remaining lighted panel. All four stared down at the human within the transparent tube, sealed within, captured in stasis-sleep like a butterfly in amber. Amindara checked and reported, “Life signs are all healthy. Metabolic rate slowed to one twentieth. No evident averse reactions to the drugs, the stix or the stasis process. He will sleep, Varadin, until he can be delivered to his new owner. Speaking of which…”

“I will give Fin the coordinates,” Varadin agreed quickly. But his hand did just stray to the clear hard case of the tube, to stroke over the peaceful, sleeping face within.

Behind him, Cob also dwelled with unnerving intensity on the Item, although the large, heavy features gave away no thought or feeling. In such a brute, was either thought or feeling possible? Or did the slave operate purely on instinct, sensation and obedience to Varadin’s commands?

Amindara glanced momentarily at Mar, and saw her assistant focused not on the Item, but on Cob. And that scarred face, too, was frighteningly still and stripped of all revealing reactions.

When Varadin tore himself away from the Item to depart the hangar, Amindara turned to Cob and said, pointedly, “Attend your Master.”

Cob blinked, as if waking from another sleep, then turned and left the hangar.

Amindara drew a long breath. Then she said, “Come, Mar. We will return to the control cabin. But I think I will just set a lock upon this receptacle…” She caused the tube to retract and seal, then did set a personal lock on the cover.

And as Mar followed his mistress out of the hangar bay, he turned and sealed that door with another lock.

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It was twenty four hours before they could even hold the de-briefing, and even at that, Colonel O’Neill and Major Carter looked like hell, barely able to keep their eyes open, tossing back Jackonesque quantities of the commissary’s industrial strength coffee.

“News, sir?” O’Neill rapped out, nailing his CO with haggard eyes.

“SG teams 3, 6 and 8 are still performing a sweep of the planet. No sign has yet been found.”

O’Neill’s first question upon waking had been “Daniel?” It was the only question any of them had right now. No sign… no sign of their archeologist had been found. Except for one torn boot, left in a well of scuffed snow and dug-up leaves. Fury, self-recrimination, fear, guilt, all boiled behind Jack’s pain-darkened eyes.

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Had it been his fault? Jack wondered. It was his worst nightmare, after all. The worst of all bad case scenarios… that Jack’s own illicit passion for a team-mate would interfere with his duty, his job, would distract him enough to make that one fatal mistake… would get someone killed. Worse yet, that someone wouldn’t be him…


“Sir. We went through the Gate to P4C 918 at 0800, per mission parameters. SG3 had already secured the area, and were holding it against our arrival, still placing the perimeter sensors. We found the planet uninhabited, and deep in winter. Trees and snow. A lot of trees, and a lot of snow,
and not much else. I sent Carter and Teal’c to assist SG3 while Daniel and I proceeded to the ruins. Daniel was pretty excited about what we found. He confirmed it is a site used by the Ancients. He filmed everything we uncovered, digging under the snow…”

Daniel had been in seventh heaven. It had taken a crowbar to get him to leave a few hours later when SG3 was finished and packing, ready to return home. A crowbar, and a sudden blizzard whipping up out of nowhere. SG1 met SG3 at the Gate camp, bid them farewell, and took shelter till the storm passed. At least it was an excuse for a much-needed break. All four huddled inside the cramped command tent, heating a meal over sterno. Then, once the wind had died down and the snow settled into a gentle fall that turned the entire planet into a Christmas card, an impromptu snowball fight had broken out. Teal’c won, naturally. As reward, Sam and Jack volunteered to teach the other two the intricacies of building a snowman. Teal’c had never built one, and Daniel, it turned out, hadn’t either. Spending most of his early years in Egypt, he hadn’t even seen snow until after his parents died… and after that, young Daniel had grown up fast and hard, and was only now catching up on some of the things he had missed.

Jack O’Neill’s heart twisted painfully, remembering the joy on Daniel’s face as he set his boonie on top of his lop-sided snowman. The laughter glistening in his blue eyes, his cold-reddened cheeks, snowflakes sparkling on his long lashes…”

“After lunch, we separated again, two and two, Carter and Teal’c to take more samples, me and Daniel back to the ruins. At approximately fifteen thirty hours, we… came under attack, I guess. Whatever hit me, it was quick, sir. I don’t even remember hitting the ground. Next thing I knew, I’m waking up in the infirmary.”

Hammond nodded, and turned to Carter. “Major?”

“Teal’c and I were collecting samples at the edge of the forest, near the perimeter. A message from the Colonel alerted us to possible trouble – a message that cut off abruptly. As we returned, we heard what sounded like the discharge of some kind of energy weapon, coming from the direction of the ruins. We double-timed it back to that location, and… encountered resistance. I laid down cover fire while Teal’c did an end-run to out-flank them. Teal’c accounted for three of the enemy and was able to secure Daniel… until more hostiles arrived. I was pinned down, Teal’c engaged one of the reinforcements in hand-to-hand combat… They looked human. The one Teal’c fought was a big, ugly son of a gun, sir, but human, or close. Then… I’m not sure what happened then, sir. There must have been another hostile behind me, maybe firing from the cover of the evergreens. I went down then, sir. Their weapons were unknown to me. An energy burst accompanied by a purple light. Teal’c and I were able to sustain one hit apiece, but a second hit put me out cold. I can only speculate that the naquadah traces in our blood gave Teal’c and I some resistance to the weapon. But… Like the Colonel, I woke up in the Infirmary.”

“I as well,” Teal’c agreed. Though he outwardly seemed his usual calm self, there was a deep anger and even deeper guilt seething below the surface of the Jaffa. He was the only member of the team who had sustained any injuries, apart from the effect of the alien weapon. But his bruises, cuts and muscle strain had been minor, nothing tretonin and a little iodine couldn’t handle. “I had Danieljackson in my arms. But it was not enough. I could not hold him.”

“You did everything you could,” General Hammond assured him, without any real hope of making a dent in the big man’s misery. It was hitting SG1 hard, losing their archeologist… again… it always did. “Have you encountered anything like these weapons before, Teal’c?”

The Jaffa hesitated. “Not myself, no… But I have heard of an energy beam that emits a purple light and renders the target instantly unconscious for twenty-four hours or more, but does no permanent
damage. It is considered to be a fable among the Jaffa, a tall tale told in the long watches of the
night. Like your urban myths or tales of alien abductions in supermarket tabloids, these things
always happen to a friend of a friend of a friend, never to one you know directly.”

“Well?” Jack prompted, impatient. “What are they?”

“Pyxy stix.”

There was a beat of silence. Then…

“Pixie sticks. You’re kidding, right?”

“The legend tells of a hidden empire of the Pyxyr. Their technology is extremely advanced and
they use it to shield themselves from the view and knowledge of other races. They avoid any world
with a Stargate, and are said to infest only those regions far from the Stargate network. Those are
regions where no System Lord will venture – whether from inconvenience in traveling without use
of Stargates, or for fear of encountering the Pyxyr, who can say? It is said no one who has ever
directly encountered a Pyxy has ever returned, although this makes it difficult to see why so many
rumors abound. It is said they do not kill, preferring to enslave their captives.” Teal’c looked
straight at O’Neill. “I believe this may be the fate that has overtaken Danieljackson.”

“Taken by pixies. I don’t believe it,” Jack retorted flatly.

Hammond gave a heavy sigh. “SG3 found no sign of your attackers. Some tracks in the snow that
don’t seem to come from anywhere or lead anywhere, and one of Dr. Jackson’s boots… that’s all.
They took your weapons and some of your gear. These… pixies, whoever they may be, had time to
do anything they liked. What they did was take Dr. Jackson, and a few souvenirs. Who, where,
why… we have no way of knowing. We will continue to search, and we will alert our allies, put
the word out, but… we all know how difficult this could be. Unless Dr. Jackson is able to find a
way to return to us… which, I need hardly remind anyone in this room, he has done before…
there’s not much more we *can* do.”

It was no more than they knew, no more than they expected… but it still came as a crushing blow.
SG1 was the best. The best of the best of both the Jaffa and the US military. Why was it so frickin’
difficult to hang on to one mild-mannered, self-effacing, gentle, sometimes pissy, occasionally
irritating and always mouthy scholar?

Then Jack groaned, “Don’t even think of calling Jonas back to fill out the team, sir… not again.
Are there any Russians available?”

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Jacob arrived with a Tok’ra posse of three trailing behind him, grabbing his daughter in a “don’t
give a damn who sees it” hug.

“How you doing, Sam?” he asked, frowning concern into her red-rimmed eyes.

Sam had to gulp heavily. “Oh, you know… Waiting for news is never easy. I take it you don’t have
any?”

“N-no… not exactly,” he prevaricated, glancing back at a middle-aged woman, one of the three
who had come with him. “We have more background on Teal’c’s pixies, but that’s about it. And
it’s nothing that’ll make anyone feel any better about this mess.”

He kept the rest for the obligatory debriefing.
“First of all, you need to know that the bounty on Daniel has been climbing lately. The System Lords are real nervous about a Tau’ri who can return from the dead as consistently as they do, without the benefit of a sarcophagus. And Anubis is throwing ten kinds of fit after finding that Daniel’s back in business among the living and un-Ascended. So in recent months, our favorite archeologist’s net worth has become, well, astronomical, to use exactly the right term.”

Sam blinked. “Meaning?”

“Anubis is now offering a stellar system for him, or the equivalent value in processed trinium. An entire system. Double suns, eight planets, three habitable, one rich in naquadah and trinium, complete with star gate and a resident slave population of half a million.”

“Three bedrooms, two baths, five appliances,” Jack grumbled. “The Tok’ra wouldn’t be tempted to collect on the bounty, would they, Jake?”

Jacob’s wry grin twisted. “We’d have to trust Anubis to honor his end of the deal first. There is *no* Tok’ra that dumb, Jack, believe me. As you can imagine, though, we’re not the only interested parties. It’s open season on Daniel. But the bounty is only payable on a live archeologist. Dead gets you squat.”

“And this is supposed to be good news?” Jack demanded hotly. “Anubis wants Daniel alive for entertainment purposes.”

“Or bait,” Teal’c suggested. “To draw in those Anubis knows will come for him. Ourselves, or Oma Desala.”

“Yeah, if she’s willing to put herself out for him again, which is a big if, seeing as she’s the one who probably tossed him back to us.”

Jacob sighed. “There’s more. It’s the Pyxyr. We didn’t believe they were real any more than Teal’c did, until about a year ago. At that time a minor Goa’uld named Mithras tripped over one of their colonies, took it almost by accident. He managed to hang on to it for twelve days. And then… This is Fanchay, host to Drysa. You remember Drysa?” he introduced the middle-aged Tok’ra woman who had come with him and sat on his left. She was comfortably padded, with muddy hazel eyes that couldn’t seem to decide what color they were, and hair with the same indeterminate quality, a shade somewhere between blonde and brown.

Oh yeah, Jack remembered Drysa. She had come with a group of Tok’ra scientists to P4X 347, the Goa’uld Pleasure Palace, while young Loren and the human three quarters of SG1 were stuck there in de-tox. And from the moment they arrived, she and Anise had been nothing but a pain in the mikta, even more than usual for Tok’ra, even more than usual for Anise. They trailed Daniel around like spaniels, tongues hanging out, vying for his attention, snapping at each other, growling when he dissed their own pet theories while applauding his perspicacity in refuting the other’s… generally behaving like bitches in heat. Which, for all intents and purposes… hours of entertainment for Carter and the other three Tok’ra (who were running a pool for which one of the “ladies” would manage to get Daniel cornered for a kiss – Carter won with none of the above), a mystery for poor Loren, a serious aggravation for him. And Daniel? Daniel hadn’t noticed a damned thing, of course. He merely commented off-hand that he didn’t think a lot of their scholarship. Harsh condemnation coming from the archeologist.

Jack had been ready to shoot them both by the end of that last week. It had been their inopportune arrival that had interrupted his first attempt at seducing Daniel, and Drysa in particular kept showing up with alarming frequency whenever he managed to get Daniel alone after that… In fact, that first time he and Daniel… well, it was the only time he had managed to get Daniel alone the
Jacob continued, “Drysa was working undercover as Mithras’ lieutenant. He sent her to Baal to ask for help and reinforcements, since his own weren’t up to the task of subduing the locals and holding the colony against any kind of counter-attack. And, for an opportunity to finally get a handle on the Pyxyr after thousands of years? Baal jumped at the chance. But by the time he and Drysa returned to the colony… there was nothing left. Nothing. The planet was a barren rock. No life, no signs of anything. Gone.”

“You could the colony not have been hidden, as the Nox can do?” Teal’c asked.

Drysa, the symbiote half of the melded being, spoke now. “There wasn’t even an atmosphere left, Master Teal’c. Baal offered me a place at his side in hopes that at least I would be able to tell him all I knew of the Pyxyr, which was little enough… their technology, their culture, anything that might enable them to be found again. I agreed, and told him enough to allay his suspicions. Then I escaped to report to the Tok’ra High Council. Since then, my assignment has been to try and find them myself, before Baal or the other System Lords, and attempt to form an alliance. I have met with no success. I haven’t found so much as a speck of dust to show their passing. When Jacob learned that SG1 had encountered the pyxy stix… it is the closest we have come. It is fortunate Jacob was able to contact me. I was about to return to Baal’s territory.”

“These Pyxyr… they’re advanced?” General Hammond asked.

“Incredibly so, by anyone’s standard,” Drysa agreed. “The colony of Iszan was a temporary work camp for a mining operation, but it housed more than five million slaves, with another five thousand overseers, guards and support staff.”

“Whoa,” Jack objected. “Five thousand to care for and guard five million?”

Drysa nodded. “Yes. Five thousand was more than adequate to the task. I saw this. I held one of the pyxy stix in my hands. A formidable weapon. The naquadah in the blood of the Goa’uld, Tok’ra and jaffa make us slightly resistant to its full effect, taking two shots to bring us down rather than one on the lowest setting or one shot on a higher. It is almost never used on its highest setting, which kills. The Pyxyr have too much respect for the market value of living slaves to risk permanently damaging them. As for escape from the camp… the support staff and guards dwelled on floating barges high above the ground, but well within range to oversee and manage the huge numbers of slave workers. They did not appear to be inhumane masters… and I did not myself witness their methods of subjugation. I suspect it must have been a combination of drugs and behavior modification. No one would speak of it to us, no one would speak to us at all. Mithras was extremely… anxious to know, yet he learned nothing. And you know what brutal and ruthless methods of persuasion and subjugation the Goa’uld are able to use.”

Jacob looked at all the participants one by one and said, “Be clear on this, everyone. The chance to form an alliance with the Pyxyr could be *the* turning point in our war with the Goa’uld. We need them. And the System Lords need to destroy them any way they can. So now it’s a race to see who can get to them first.”

After the briefing, the survivors of SG1 were slow to get up and leave the table, still groggy from the lingering effects of the pyxy stix, or perhaps, just drained and demoralized, at a loss without their missing fourth. General Hammond studied them with concern, then shared a glance with Jacob, the last other left in the room.

“I’m sorry about this, guys. I wish I had better news for you.”
Jack waved that away. “It’s okay. You’ve done your best. We’ve got the word out. Someone will hear something soon.”

Jacob was seriously concerned now. “You do understand, don’t you? We think these Pyxy slave traders have taken Danny so they can trade him to Anubis. Shouldn’t you all be a little more… I don’t know… concerned?”

Sam smiled wanly at her father. “I guess it’s just that the novelty’s worn off, Dad. This isn’t the first time something like this has happened. And if it was any of the rest of us, sure, there’d be cause for concern… but… well, this is Daniel.”

“Exactly my point!”

“Danieljackson always returns to us. Always,” Teal’c declared.

Jack sighed and stretched, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, the original bad penny. Come on, Jake, we’ve seen it before. Big bad aliens grab Daniel, and think that just because they’ve taken away his weapons, that he’s disarmed. But then he starts to talk. And talk, and talk. And talk. And pretty soon, he’s worn them down to nothing… by the time we arrive on the scene, a day late and a dollar short, he’s already charmed the hell out of them, along with any naquadah or trinium they might have lying around. Works every goddamned time. Against glowy Ancients, large slimy sea monsters, big stinky lizards, you name it.”

Teal’c affirmed. “Danieljackson’s voice is more formidable than any weapon possessed by the Tau’ri, Goa’uld, Asgard or Tok’ra.”

Shaking his head, Jacob glanced at his daughter, and saw her shrug, then nod.

Jack said, “Just wait and see, Jake. Daniel will talk his way out of this.”

General Hammond sighed. “He’s going to have to, at least until we can get some kind of clue as to where to start looking for him.”
Preparations

“Mar. Fetch the cart. You will assist me in preparing the Item.”

The Dealer stood next to the receptacle, the top hatch retracted, gazing down on the serene face of the blissfully hibernating Item. He would be unaware of anything, even the passing of time, not even a dream to disturb him, until his new master chose to revive him with the appropriate drugs.

It was not, strictly speaking, required to prepare this Item, given the circumstances. The buyer, it seemed, would hardly care for the Item’s state on delivery, other than he be alive, and the price had, apparently, already been settled. But they had been en route to the contact’s rendezvous point for some days, and Amindara was bored and unaccountably restless. This venture had the potential to become either an unimaginable success, or a genuine fatal fumble. As yet, she had no clear feel for which way it would go. Still… until the time came for action and reaction, there were certain… advantages yet to be exercised.

Amindara found calm and comfort in certain practices. One was this, preparation of a particularly valuable and comely piece of Trade merchandise.

First, Amindara removed his garments. She used a small beam cutter to slice away the bulky, ugly, obscuring cloth, shearing through many layers of thick, tough fabric. She pulled them away and dropped them on the hangar floor for Mar to sweep away. Shred by shred, the still white form beneath was revealed. About each wrist were arcane instruments, primitive devices of the Tau’ri, of only passing interest to her. One seemed to be a time-piece, the other a simple transmitter, designed to send a code of some kind. These she unbuckled and tossed toward the pile of other Tau’ri relics, to be reviewed later.

Amindara spent a moment in simple appreciation of the nude body spread before her, ending her study with a simple sigh. So perfect. A slender male form, but nicely muscled across the chest, shoulders, down corded arms and sculpted thighs. Very little body hair. No wonder he seemed so young, though now that she was so close to the warm, living body, she could see lines and signs of age on him. No, not age… maturity. Not the same thing at all. But, the body hair… at his armpits, groin, a very light trail down from the navel to the pelvic girdle… that was all. Exquisite hands with long, delicate fingers. Long feet, too, to support the height, but elegantly formed. She catalogued the few scars. He had been damaged by Goa’uld weaponry: staff weapon blasts to upper right arm and left thigh. And, if Amindara were any judge, the small round holes were from Tau’ri projectile emitters. Last, in the hollow inside one hip, a long scar that had been stitched shut. The kind of primitive medical practices seen among savages and slave spawn. Sacrilege, to see such deformation of this otherwise perfect specimen.

The hair of his head was silky and fine, but for the Pyxyr ideal of masculine beauty, needed to be just a little longer, to trail and curl over nape and forehead. A depilatory would be needed on his lower face. His fair coloring meant the half-day’s growth of beard was all but invisible, but she could feel the fine soft bristles under her gently questing fingertips.

Mar rolled up the cart with the supplies. Unguents, creams, grooming tools, a wide array of glass bottles, some clear, some colored, some plain, some shaped whimsically, all containing a variety of different ointments, salves, oils and perfumes. The placement of each bottle was deliberate, planned, familiar, just as Amindara directed, so she need not even look to put her hand on the needed object. Always assuming Mar hadn’t already anticipated and placed it in her grasp.
She began, as always, with the depilatory. A cream applied to the desired areas, for Mar to scrape away immediately after, with the detritus of hairs and flaking skin. All that was left afterward was the hair on his head. Even his groin was now nude as a child’s, making him seem achingly youthful and vulnerable.

It was then Mar’s task to clean the body thoroughly, wiping every inch, front and back, top and bottom, surface and crevices, with a sterilizing and antiseptic fluid, applied with a cloth. Meanwhile, Amindara reviewed her supplies, deciding on one of her moisturizing creams, one of the softening and fragrant oils, and the single perfume she favored most on a male, that suited the unique musk she had already detected on this one. She lifted that amber-colored, fluted bottle, removed the stopper, and sniffed delicately. Oh yes, this would be perfect for him.

When Mar signified that he had completed, she began to work with the smooth, soft flesh, running her hands over the skin, warming him and enjoying the slow flush as she spread the moisturizer over him. In stasis, his blood was slow to flow, and there were few of the autonomic reactions one would expect from an awake and aware body, like the shiver of muscles at a too-intimate touch. But she noted with a smile that his penis was moving. Very slowly, it was true, at only a twentieth of what would be his normal reaction time, delayed and building as she worked with the Item, but his body’s unconscious excitement brought to mind the joyful enthusiasm she had seen in the hologram.

She took her carefully warmed oils, rubbed them between her palms, then spread them over the flesh to soften and tone. She always took her time with this. There was a visceral, satisfying pleasure in the play of her hands, palms and fingers, over smooth sleek skin. Especially on a body so appealing and beautiful.

She began with his feet. Molding to slender ankles and tendons, feeling the bones beneath moving slightly under the pressure she applied. There were callouses upon the soles and heels that she directed Mar to grate away with a rough stone, as she moved on up those long, long legs: firm calves, the hollows behind his knees, adorably dimpled. She had not been mistaken in her first impression – the thigh muscles were indeed hard and strong and well defined. He must be a fast runner. A lean torso such as his would only enhance that speed.

Narrow hips and waist widened to a strong chest. Small pink nipples pebbled under her hands. She savored the strength in his sculpted pectorals, shoulders and neck. Then, with Mar’s assistance, she rolled him over and began at the vulnerable nape of his neck, to follow a course down his spine… to another appealing hollow at the base of his vertebrae, just before the swell of round, perfect buttock cheeks, also adorably dimpled. She molded her hands over them and so parted the firm globes. The hard muscles beneath the sleek skin seemed to shudder, a slow flexing in reaction to the touch. Amindara smiled and bent to examine…

She had certainly not expected this. The hologram display had led her to believe… certainly, when it had been taken, the passion and the experience of sexual relations with another man had caused him surprise and gratitude, implying, at least, that he had been unfamiliar or new to such practices at that time. But the recording was at least a year old. Perhaps more. How, how, could anyone have experienced all this generous, giving beauty, seen that last, lingering smile… and not clung to it like a creeper vine? Was his invisible lover dead? How else to explain the fact that it had been a very long time since anything invaded the tight, virginal-seeming sphincter?

With a fond pat and a sigh, Amindara had Mar help her roll the Item on his back. She dabbed the perfume to each side of his neck, just under the ear. Then to the inside of each arm. Then over each hip bone. And lastly, to the crease at the top of each leg. And there, rising rampant, proud, a penis that would do credit to any male. Ripe and dark like an exotic fruit, and juicy too, weeping just a
drop of pearl-like honey from the head.

Poor beauty. Such a stiffened member would ache, even in his stasis-sleep. Could she resist the invitation? No, she could not. And as she smiled and bent to kiss his member, she realized she had been longing to do just this since she had first seen that damned recording of Varadin’s. To taste of this succulent flesh, to share in this exquisite loveliness. Her hands moved to grip him as she swallowed more and more of the firm organ, fingers tickling at the pendulous balls beneath, coaxing more and more from him, even in his slowed and sluggish state. Though he did not move, Amindara could swear she heard a soft, low moan from him at one point. His fingers flexed slowly in and out of a fist, and his head did just twist from one side to the other, though as if moving through syrup. It did indeed take a long time to bring him to ejaculation, a spurt of nectar she drank greedily from him, then a slow, slow slide into limp dormancy once more.

When she had completed, she fondly patted his loose and slackened penis, then stood and backed away to view the entire body with delight and new appreciation.

There was something extraordinarily winsome about this Item, beyond physical perfection and comely appeal. What it was, Amindara could not quantify, but she knew she never had, and never would, possess even in passing, anything so fine, ever again.

Amindara permitted herself one more indulgence, knowing her possession of this Item was to be so short. She went to his face, the eyebrows still arched as if in surprise from his recent unconscious pleasure. Gently, she pried up the lids, to behold the clear, pure blue of his eyes. His beautiful, unseeing eyes.

Then she looked up, and found Mar looking at her. A red flush stained his cheeks, and his pale grey eyes held some intense emotion she could not begin to guess at. She frowned. Mar noted the reaction and dropped his eyes immediately, mouth tightened to a narrow line. But it was enough to break whatever spell Amindara had fallen under. She let the Item’s eyelids drop back in place, then she stepped back, straight and business-like once more.

“I have completed the preparations, Mar. Seal the containment receptacle.”

It was with a shock that Amindara turned and found Cob directly behind her. He was looking beyond her, staring at the Item, lying pale, glistening, nude, and now quite limp though pleasingly flushed, upon his palette. Helpless in unaware stasis. Again, the features on Cob’s brutish face revealed nothing, but his dark eyes shone with concentrated intent on the Item. Amindara controlled a shudder with difficulty.

“What are you doing here, Cob?”

“The Master wanted you to know. We will soon reach our destination.”

“He could have sent me word over the ship address system.”

“He sent me.”

As this was unanswerable, Amindara had no choice but to accept it. “Cob. I am giving you a command, not just as Mistress, but as owner and commander of this ship. Do not come to this hangar again. For any reason. Do you understand? If Varadin sends you with another message for me you will remain outside and use the call button. You understand this?”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“Disobey me in this, Cob, and I will put you in a tube and flush you into space. Do you
understand? And so I will tell your Master, as well.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“Then leave. Now. And do not come back in here unless I, and only I, command you to do so.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

He had not looked at her, even once. Not even a flickering glance. He had not been able to tear his eyes from the Item, even for that. But he did turn and he did go.

Amindara was very careful to close and lock the Item’s container. And then she added a hand-print verification. And changed the code.

And when she and Mar left, Mar closed and locked the hangar door. And he changed the lock code on that, as well.

Amindara made her way to the control cabin, to find Varadin awaiting her, and Fin slowing the *Marmoset* to sub-light. Once in parking position, just outside the gravitational influence of an unremarkable red giant star, Fin began a systematic sweep for other ships in the area. There were none.

Fin glanced at his mistress, then at Mar, and ventured, “Would the other craft be cloaked? Is there a code we must transmit? Something we should seek?”

Varadin shook his head. “Perhaps my contact has not yet arrived.”

Amindara felt that indefinable feeling steel over her, that “this is going to be a fine funt” feeling, and said with admirable calm, “We are already late by two days, Varadin. Would I be correct in assuming that it will not be possible to proceed to the buyer without the benefit of your contact’s knowledge and counsel?”

“You would be correct to so assume. I cannot make contact with the buyer myself. The contact would not tell me the location of the rendezvous agreed upon, or the coded greeting that will prevent him from blasting us out of space as an unknown and therefore hostile entity.”

“Ah. The buyer is paranoid then.”

“But very rich and very determined to obtain the Item at any price.”

“Then perhaps he would hesitate to shoot us to bits?”

“He has many enemies. Accidents happen. Even if I knew where the buyer might be found, or we could track him down, approaching would be... problematic, without the contact to guide us.”

“Ah. And... how much more delayed might our contact be?”

“Not long, I would guess. Why? You have somewhere else you must be, my dear Amindara?”

Amindara did not dignify that with a reaction, but turned to Fin. “Are we within any alien sphere of influence here?”

“No, Mistress. The nearest system with any inhabitants of any kind is Hecticar, and that is a Pyxyr subject world. We are beyond any regular trade route, the nearest planet with an Ancient’s Portal is well beyond Hecticar from this location. The Asgard have never been known to travel in this region. We should be safe enough.”
“Mm. Well, find a nice obscuring dust cloud and park. Sensors on full and constant sweep, to the limit of their reach. We shall watch for our contact from a somewhat less open place.”

Varadin grinned. “Ever the cautious one, my dear Amindara.”

“Except when entering a venture with a partner such as yourself, Varadin. Oh, and… keep your lackey away from our profit, Varadin, or I will make good on my promise to him, and flush him into the void. You understand?”

Varadin merely smiled enigmatically.

Amindara shook her head and grumbled, “I mean it, Varadin. Cob is a menace. And he’s been… looking. At the Item.”

“You worry too much, Amindara. From what I gather, the buyer will be unconcerned by physical damage, as long as the Item is alive. That is the only requirement.”

“Mm.” Amindara’s mouth twisted at a suddenly sour taste… and it was not the salt musk of semen under her tongue, either.

Å

Mar unlocked the hangar door, and he and Fin went inside.

“The Mistress collected artifacts from Androsi, possessions of the Tau’ri. We are to examine and sort them, catalogue any that might be of some value, and we may dispose of the rest as we like.”

“Food?” Fin asked, his dark eyes lighting, even as he rubbed his uncomfortably drying tentacles.

Mar chuckled. “Are you always hungry?”

“What can I say to that? Yes. One of my tentacles is hollow and yearns to be filled.”

“Come then.” Mar was especially cautious in looking back down the corridor, then shutting and locking the hangar door behind. He had not seen anything, but he had felt it, a crawling at the back of his neck… Cob was lurking. He was never far from the hangar. Never. And that made Mar’s flesh shudder.

Fin glanced at his fellow slave with a shrewd look. “Cob?”

Mar only nodded.

“Is the Item really that comely?”

Mar shrugged. “You saw the recording. In the flesh he is… stunning.”

Fin sighed, shaking his head.

Mar shook himself. “Let us proceed, and you can start on that stomach ache this alien food is bound to give you.”

Mar and Fin sat on the hangar floor with the heap of rough white-dyed packs between them. They pulled items out, one after the other, setting them on the floor. Mar set about reorganizing the treasures in piles. Food packets here, items of extra clothing there, parts for weapon ordnance there. Miscellaneous items of unidentified purpose sat in the center. There was little or nothing to intrigue the Mistress in any of it, certainly not the ordnance, clothing or food. Which only meant he
and Fin could have their pick of the spoils. Although Fin was strongly drawn to the food packets, it was the miscellany that drew Mar’s intense curiosity.

Fin looked at foil packets, shaking and squishing them to get an idea of consistency. One smaller bar-shaped packet had been ripped at some point... it may once have been a pressed bar of seeds and nuts, smelled sweetly of honey, and seemed to already have a bite taken out of it. The remainder seemed to have acquired a moss-like coating... with a cry, Fin threw it down, because he could swear that he saw something inside the fuzzy green mass move!

Mar chuckled. “You should know better than to try to eat something a primitive alien has been carrying about, Fin. Put those down. What do you make of this?”

He handed his companion a segment of tube... silver-grey on the outside, of a smooth and rubbery consistency, while the inside was stiffened paper. Fin studied it closely, then one tentacle reached to rub against a line on the outside... an edge... he pulled... a corner lifted away with a loud ripping sound... sticky on the inside. “Adhesive of some kind. You know...” Fin glanced over his shoulder at a section of exposed pipe that had been leaking almost since the construction of the *Marmoset*... He got up, went over and unraveled a length of the silver rubber, with another echoing ripping sound, then applied it around the pipe. Its faint whistling slow leak of oxygen was suddenly stilled. With a wide grin, he looked back at Mar in triumph.

“All right, smug thing. Come here and find a use for this.” Mar held out a small vial of some clear but viscous liquid. It had a shaped piece at one end and a cap that could be turned to screw off... but the shaped piece would extend, and... a thin but oily substance spurted onto Fin’s delving tentacle. With a cry, he sent his human hands to try and scrape the substance away... until a cry of quite another kind caused him to slow, and rub. A blissful smile of relief spread across his features as the fluid slicked over the surface of the chapped and raw tentacle.

“It’s perfect, Mar! Far better than any of the Mistress’ creams... all of which seem to contain too much perfume or other irritating agents... I don’t know when I’ve ever known such ease outside my bath!”

“I am happy for you,” Mar said curtly. “Let us finish here...”

“What do you suppose it’s really intended to be?”

“I can have no notion. Now...”

“But why would soldiers carry it to another planet, unless it was vital in some way?”

“Perhaps one of them also suffers from dryness. Or perhaps it is an oil they require for their weapons, their projectile emitters. These possess long, narrow channels that might easily clog, would require greasing, may need some tool inserted and forced up against the resistance of the tight passage... who knows? Or perhaps, being an aged human, the older Tau’ri suffered from constricted passages that required stretching and opening for easement of certain bodily functions. That pack belonged to the older male, that much I know.”

“How do you know?”

Mar tapped a rolled up black knit cap that was tucked in a loop of the pack. “He wore that earlier, while playing in the snow with the Item.”

Fin carefully sealed up the vial and tucked it in a pouch at his belt. Then he stood and went to the one lit cover plate in the containment bank.
“Is he truly so very comely, Mar?”

Mar sighed. “I shall satisfy this itch of yours, once. Then we must clean this up and go.” Mar accessed the monitor, which unraveled a life-sized projection of the tube contents. “Well? What do you think?”

Fin gave a sigh. “He is indeed beautiful.” The soft words sounded wistful. Envious.

“It is not a good thing, to be a slave and so beautiful, Fin,” Mar told his companion. “Believe me. Not good at all. Not for him.”

Fin let his tentacle rest on the transparent lid. He was lost in contemplation for a moment, something about the human on the palette bringing memories long dormant to the surface. “I was born in the replication center. But you were born free, Mar. What was it like?”

Mar winced. “You know I dislike talking about it.”

“You miss it. You long to return.”

“There is nothing to return to. My entire village was enslaved that day. I have never known where the others were taken, where they were sold. My parents, my sisters, my little brother… my betrothed. I would have been married. I would have had children of my own. If not for…”

“If not for the Pyxyr. If not for Cob.”

Mar shrugged, attempting to control the bitter flood of regret. “Do not make me do this, Fin. Do not make me remember a life that ended years ago. I have no more choice than you. We must live this life, or none at all. And the Mistress is not as bad as some… not as bad as most.”

“I know. We could both be in a herzen mine right now. Would be if she did not find us useful. Still… sometimes I wonder what it would be like to have a choice. To be a master, not a slave.”

Mar shrugged. “From what I have observed, it is not so very different. You think the Mistress has much choice of the company she keeps, the orders she obeys? With greater freedom also comes greater risk. We have no decisions to make, no plans for advancement to fret over, no lucrative ventures to chase.”

“Perhaps,” Fin granted. He tapped the receptacle case. “What of him.”

“What of him?”

“He has lived all of his life free. More, if you believe what the recording showed so clearly, he had joy. Love. And now he shall be bought and sold. When he awakes… What the Broker had to say of the buyer… I doubt there will be any mercy there.”

“And what of that. Fin, you are in an odd mood.”

“I know it. But I look at him… I remember the recording… he had such hope, such passion… and we have stripped him of that as surely as we stripped him of his clothing. This is all he has left, just this container of flesh, and even that will be sold away for another to do with as he pleases. And I wonder what will become of him. What will be left of him to recall that hologram image.”
The crew and passengers of the *Marmoset* settled into a waiting period of boredom.

Varadin and Cob whiled the time with physical exercises in the hangar deck – the largest fit open space on the vessel – but always Amindara insisted on Mar being present, to oversee, and to ensure her slave was the last out of the deck, and that he had carefully locked the doors behind him.

Amindara herself spent much time in the control cabin, using the *Marmoset*’s internal sensors to make certain no unauthorized passengers ventured near the Item. In this Mar often joined her, satisfying himself that he always, always knew where the large brutish slave Cob was lurking. All too often, it was near the hangar access corridor.

Fin puttered with refit projects, and experimented with different applications for the oddly useful Tau’ri rubber adhesive strips. He smiled a great deal, even outside the humid atmosphere of the control cabin, because he was also making use of the Tau’ri oil.

Fin happened to be on duty one late night shift, alone in the control cabin, making a random search of communication channels, listening for the identification call of the Broker’s contact. He would pause to briefly monitor interesting conversations, jokes, or snatches of music from the far side of the galaxy, not always of Pyxyr origin.

Then he happened upon one that was all too familiar… It was the picture display that immediately caught Fin’s attention and made him focus in on the broadcast, and hit the record. Two sentences in, he called Mar to the control cabin. Urgently.

Mar arrived slightly flustered and annoyed – caught doing what, Fin wondered? – and demanded what was so important. Fin merely gestured to the monitor as more of the damning alert played out.

“It’s on continuous loop feed. Original time stamp says it began yesterday, and it’s taken this long to reach us from the Rekash station. It contains attached background, a lot of it. Still running a capture. It’s a Pyxyr Security Prime Alert, Mar. This is serious.”

Mar went pale – even paler than usual, and nodded, his mouth a tight line. “I’ll wake the Mistress.”

Not much later, Amindara joined her assistant and pilot in the control cabin, all three grim and anxious. She noted first that the monitor was back in sensor display. She nodded to Fin. “You have it all?”

Fin gulped and nodded. “Yes, Mistress,” he replied, an embarrassing squeak at the end betraying his own nervousness. He activated the second monitor station and set it to replay the transmission.

Prime Alerts issued from Pyxyr Imperial Security were always a matter of threat to the security of the Empire. Always to be taken deadly seriously, and almost always resulted in execution orders when the danger passed. The last had been the Iszan incident. The five million slaves had been relocated, and four thousand five hundred support staff re-assigned (though in severely demoted positions) and five hundred of the command, management and security overseers, including the governor and mine foreman, had ended in replication centers. Amindara had never known for sure how Varadin managed to escape that debacle relatively unscathed – except that he had been there entirely by chance, delivering a consignment of new slaves, and he did lose his transport in the re-acquisition of the colony. Hence his need for Amindara in the present venture.
“Very well,” Amindara sighed, fatalistically. “Let me see it.”

All three immediately recognized the signature image. It was their Androsi Item. He was in the ugly dull green and patchy uniform of the crystal image, with the distinctive symbol on the shoulder. Branded across his flat-image chest was the red-lettered flashing word, “Alert!” Then a neutral, expressionless voice began the damning indictment.

“Ten days ago, Pyxyr standard, this alien human, Dr. Daniel Jackson, a Tau’ri of Earth, was stolen from a scouting mission on the abandoned Ancient’s planet of Androsi. His companions, left alive after the attack, identified those responsible as humanoid beings with – to them – advanced weaponry. They also described the weapons used against them, and there can be no doubt that these were Pyxyr stix. The unavoidable conclusion is that a Pyxyr citizen, possibly involved with the Trade, has taken this human.

“While, technically, the Tau’ri of Earth might be considered to fall under Article Thirteen of the Trade Ethics Regulations, as they were once enslaved by the Goa’uld, they have long been free of Goa’uld oppression. They now belong to the Asgard Protected Planets Treaty, and have engaged in amazingly effective actions against our mutual enemy. In these efforts, the human, Dr. Daniel Jackson, has played a pivotal role.”

There was a color-key symbol to indicate more information was available and appended to the broadcast. Amindara didn’t need to ask if Fin had captured it for later viewing. The broadcast went inexorably on.

“We are uncertain as to the precise technological stage of development of the Tau’ri. But they have made powerful allies. Since the abduction, the Pyxyr Imperial High Command has received communication – through the usual channels – from the Asgard, the Nox, the Tok’ra and the Ascended. They inform us that the safe return of this one human to his people is of vital importance to them all. They further warn that if he should fall into the hands of the Goa’uld, they would be, to quote the communiqués received, ‘most displeased’, and would feel compelled to take steps with those held responsible.”

Amindara made a croaking noise. Fin began rubbing his tentacles obsessively, even though his new oil had considerably relieved the irritated tissues. Mar swallowed an oath in his native argot.

“The Pyxyr Empire currently enjoys a state of truce with the Asgard, the Nox and the Ascended. They have made no effort to interfere or press us into overt interaction with them. This truce is now jeopardized. With the Goa’uld threat growing daily, the security of the Empire is under its severest pressure since Iszan.”

“I knew that Iszan would come up,” Amindara muttered. “I just knew it.”

“We, the government of the Pyxyr Empire, have judged the Tau’ri to be a free and neutral race, exempt from Article Thirteen of the Trade Ethics Regulations. And so Dr. Daniel Jackson is to be considered free-born. If any citizen of the Pyxyr Empire, their agents or chattels, have taken possession of Dr. Daniel Jackson for any reason, they are to return to Pyxyr territory immediately and yield him up to the nearest Pyxyr Security authority at once. This is a matter of utmost urgency. The continued security of the Pyxyr Empire depends upon the safe and immediate return of Dr. Daniel Jackson. But Pyxyr Security must first ensure he will not carry imperial secrets with him when he rejoins his people.”

Fin and Mar traded looks. That meant a visit to a replication center to have his brain wiped clean of all memories. They had both encountered survivors of this procedure… Cob was one. Most others had not fared so well.
“Appended to this alert is the complete description of the penalties that will be incurred by any Pyxyr citizen, agent or chattel who fails to comply with this order, along with background information on Dr. Daniel Jackson, provided to us by those races who seek him: the Asgard and the Tok’ra.”

The transmission finally came to an end. The face of the beautiful Item faded. Three mouths pressed into tight lines, unable to open on a single useful thing to say.

Fin reached with one reddened raw tentacle to press the next play, the captured background on the Androsi Item – Dr. Daniel Jackson of the Tau’ri.

Scholar. Explorer. Member of the Tau’ri premier contact team. The man who had discovered the secrets of the Ancients’ Portal left on Earth, though it had been lost and buried for ten thousand years, its language long dead and forgotten. The man who destroyed Ra and freed Abydos, along with half the galaxy. With his team, responsible for ending the poisoned reigns of many other System Lords and minor Goa’uld: Hathor, Apophis, Seth, Chronos, Nirrti, Sokar, Ammonet. A human who had saved his own world, and many other planets and races, from destruction. A human who had joined the Ascended, for a time…

Amindara groaned at that, burying her face in her hands. Yes, it needed only this.

…and was currently the subject of the richest single bounty ever offered for one sapient being: an entire stellar system, to be paid upon delivery of Dr. Daniel Jackson, alive, to the Supreme System Lord of the Goa’uld, Anubis.

No mention was made, anywhere, of what Anubis planned to do with the Item, once delivered. No doubt imagination would pale before the reality. No mention or additional warning was offered to discourage anyone from attempting to collect this bounty. This was hardly necessary. No price could possibly be enjoyed by the successful applicant, not if the dreaded Pyxyr Imperial Security made it their mission to take retribution.

Amindara took a deep breath as Mar and Fin traded glances eloquent of helpless, hopeless disquiet.

“Mar,” she said with an amazingly calm and soft voice, “would you be so good as to awaken Varadin and request his presence here, as soon as may be convenient for him? Then I wish you to make yourself scarce and await my command. Fin. You too will stand down until I summon you. Go. Both of you. Now.”

Neither had ever seen their Mistress turn quite that shade of grey, nor the slitted eyes, nor heard that level tone in her voice. As one, they bolted to the door, making a momentary jam in it before they sorted themselves out and Mar shouldered ahead and out.

While she waited, the Dealer turned to the second appended portion of the transmission – the penalties to be incurred by those who fail to follow the direction of the Prime Alert with all due speed. She was reviewing the main transmission again, when Varadin appeared.

“Oh, Varadin? Come and look at this, will you?” she called out sweetly.

When she had him seated at the consol she replayed the broadcast, then sat back to watch her treacherous partner’s reactions. He paled quite nicely, but his impassive frozen countenance revealed to her just how aware he must have been of the risks of their venture before he had ever approached her.

“When were you going to inform me of all this, Varadin?”
A sick smile oozed from his lips. “Never, my dear Amindara?”

“Tau’ri, you said. Subject race of the Goa’uld, you said. Priceless, you said.”

“He is* Tau’ri. They *were* the first humanoid host race of the Goa’uld. And his value, surely, is now beyond question. I told you only the truth.”

“Leaving much truth unspoken. Allies of the Asgard, the Tok’ra… You did not think it *relevant* that Thor himself, Supreme Commander of the Asgard Fleet, would be demanding Dr. Daniel Jackson’s *immediate* return?”

“Only if we are caught. The Asgard are far too busy with their own concerns to spare the resources it would take to come after us. No one else has technology that could find or take us. Only the Pyxyr fleet could do that.”

“Ah, how relieved I am for that. What then have we to fear? Why would our own people wish to trouble themselves with us, unless it is that you and I have succeeded in drawing the attention of the universe to the Empire – a thing no one else has done? Our borders were secure enough when no one knew they were there… Reparation to be made via organ and tissue donation, Varadin. And in time, they might relent enough to permit what’s left of us to die!”

“Now, Amindara… Only. If. We. Are. Caught. Yes, there is risk. But the rewards, Amindara! Think of the rewards!”

“No wonder the bounty is so high. He and this SG1 of his have killed half the System Lords! I do not doubt those who are left are mad to get their hands on him. Is that who your buyer is, Varadin? A System Lord?”

Varadin eyed his furious partner with a speculative murmur. Well, he supposed now was the best opportunity to tell her the rest. She was unlikely to grow any angrier than she already was.

“The buyer is *THE* System Lord, my dear, cowardly, excitable Amindara. It is Anubis.”

Amindara felt the blood drain from her face, and the air leave her lungs in a great whoosh. And when she could reclaim the latter with a deep breath, she finally said, “Of course it is. Are you taking the star system he has apparently offered as your payment?”

“No. I asked for processed trinium instead. Easier to sell, and I would not then be tied to a known location deep in Goa’uld territory where anyone could find me…”

Amindara nodded. “Yes, that would make your situation awkward. They say the Tau’ri are tenacious, vindictive, and revenge-minded. And they want their Dr. Jackson back.”

Varadin mis-liked the calm tone she used. “You… are taking this well,” he observed.

“You think so? Finding you have lied to me and betrayed me deep into an illegal and potentially lethal act, kidnapping a freeborn of a protected and highly-allied race, and selling him not just to his greatest enemy, but also our own? In fact, an act of treason against the Pyxyr Empire? This time next cycle, I may be chained to a replication center cot, without arms, legs, lungs, heart, liver or kidney, half my epidermis stripped from my body, eyes and hair transplanted to some bald, blind senior! Why should I not take all that well?”

“We are in little danger of being caught, Amindara, and if we are… we simply… dispose of the only evidence.”
“You mean…”

“The Item already lies in a stasis tube. We need only punch the red button. Once the Item is ash scattered across a parsec of space… who’s to know?”

Amindara groaned, her head shaking in her hands. “This venture began with a quite remarkably messy funt, and is quickly deteriorating from there. We’ve lost four men, we’ve been revealed to the Tau’ri, and however this turns out, we will have half the galaxy barking on our heels for the rest of our lives: our own people included. We steal this Item, a freeborn man, and either we trade him to the Goa’uld, his worst enemy and ours, or we blow him to atoms. And his crimes? To be an enemy of our enemy, the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and to have the misfortune of being an ignorant innocent of a backward race, because if his SG1 had been more advanced, we never would have been able to come near him. Ah yes, and for this backward race to have succeeded in gathering great and powerful allies to them. Allies of the Ascended, Varadin! The thrice-damned Ancient-spawned Ascended! He’s been Ascended himself!”

“The Ascended have not interfered with the un-ascended for millennia. Come, my dear partner. We need only keep our nerve, and untold wealth will be ours. We can buy freedom and escape, even as expensive as that may be in this case. Nothing has gone wrong yet—“

“Nothing has gone wrong! Nothing has gone wrong? This gets better and better. But beware, you scum sucking traitorous vurmer. Unlike you, there are limits to my greed.”

“Precisely. But where are those limits? This Item will bring us both untold wealth.”

“If we survive. The Goa’uld are notorious for being unable to close a business arrangement in good faith.”

“Not when they want something as badly as they want this Item.”

“If we can even complete the sale. A thing I begin to doubt. Your contact *still* has not appeared.”

It was at this fortuitous point, that the long-awaited coded transmission from their contact echoed into the control cabin. Smiling smugly, Varadin gave the coded reply that would bring the contact to them.

When Fin went looking, he found Cob first. The word that came to his mind was ‘lurking’, in the corridor leading to the hangar. As soon as the big slave saw Fin, he retreated at once toward his Master’s quarters. Fin continued to the hangar, to see, from the security access log Amindara had commanded Mar to add to the new lock mechanism, that Mar was still within. Fin pressed the entry request. After a long moment, the recognition routine identified Fin’s unique tentacle signature, the port slid open and Fin entered, only to have the port automatically close and lock behind him. A recent innovation of Mar’s.

It did not surprise Fin to find the Item’s monitor displaying the life-size holographic image, with Mar standing by, staring down at the serene face. Fin positioned himself opposite Mar, both staring down. There was a contemplative silence.

“He freed Abydos,” Mar reflected. “An entire world, free, after millennia of slavery to the Goa’uld.”

“More than just Abydos,” Fin replied. “There’s a list. A long list.”
“He can read the Ancients’ script. That’s why he was on Androsi.”

“He can read almost thirty languages, native to Earth and not. He’s the first of his kind to learn alien languages. There’s a list of those, too.”

“Scholar, it said. There was no writing among our tribe, but wise men, men who kept the spoken records, were highly revered.”

Fin had no comment on that, merely a slightly wistful sense of loss that he had no people, no tribe, no ‘kind’.

“He lost his family,” Fin said instead. “He had a family, but one by one, he lost them all. His parents killed in an accident when he was a boy, and he saw it. His grandfather abandoned him. His wife was stolen by Apophis, made host to Ammonet the Goa’uld, and he finally lost her after searching the galaxy for her. Her son joined the Ascended. His grandfather went with the Mayanar. That… that must be hard, to lose everyone. Everyone. Much harder than never having anyone?” Fin asked of his friend, who would know.

Mar only nodded, taking a deep breath to swallow back tears.

“He’s died, Mar. Died and come back. More than once. And all of this was before that hologram image was taken. So much sadness and loss, and still, he has the capacity for love, for joy. That must take such… courage.”


Fin drooped like a punctured bubble. “Nothing. Just… it could seem he is incredibly unlucky in some areas, but it is balanced by the fact that he is unbelievably lucky in others. Does it not seem to you as if… as if… something must watch over the fate of this one human? That he is extraordinary and important for some, as yet, unrevealed purpose?”

Mar glowered. “No. He is merchandise. An Item. No more. They’re going to sell him to Anubis.”

“In the face of a Security Prime Alert?”

“It’s too late for them to back out of the venture now.”

A new, terrifying, and revolutionary notion occurred to Fin then. “And… shall we allow this, you and I?”

“Shall we… what? What do you mean?”

Fin rubbed reflectively at one tentacle, more gently now, soothing on more of the thin Tau’ri oil.

“Just… one man alone cannot free an entire people, unless those people wish to be free. And if they truly wish to be free, why do they need to wait for one man to do it for them? And if there is some extraordinary destiny at work overseeing this man’s fate… Perhaps, if we become a part of it, aid it, it will carry us along with it.”

Mar blinked. And swallowed.

“You… what…” and trailed off into a long, long silence.

“Just a thought,” Fin ventured.

More silence.
Rendezvous

The ship address system called Fin to the control cabin, and warned that imminent docking would result in the hangar deck becoming depressurized.

Mar punched at the control to turn off the monitor, then led his companion to the hangar door. There, they both checked to ensure the lock was fully engaged. And as Fin retreated to control, Amindara, Varadin and Cob appeared to greet the new arrival. Mar fell behind his Mistress.

The de-pressurization cycle completed, and they heard the sound of the external hangar bay doors grating open. Then the sound of the much smaller ship easing inside and settling with a felt bump. Then the grate of closing doors, and the hissing of the hangar being re-pressurized.

At last, a green light signaled it was safe to open the interior doors. Amindara placed her hand on the identity pad to unlock it, and they all trooped in to meet the new arrival to the *Marmoset*.

Amindara met a woman about her own apparent age, height and built on similar generous and comfortable lines. But this woman’s expression was sour, as if she had spent her life sucking unripe velner-fruit. Her eyes, her hair, everything about her seemed deceptive, false, a truth hidden under a lie, and under that truth, another lie.

Varadin seemed to think he had met a kindred spirit. Perhaps he had.

“My dear Drysa. My dear Fanchay. Greetings, and welcome to the *Marmoset*. We had feared the worst when you were so delayed.”

The woman, the Tok’ra, seemed reluctant to let this Pyxyr embrace her, but allowed it. Still need something from the vurmer, do you? Amindara speculated.

“I was not able to depart from the Tok’ra base before the Tau’ri sent out their alerts about Dr. Jackson. Selmac knew I had met the Pyxyr at Iszan, when I served Mithras, and therefore could offer information. He dragged me to a meeting with the Tau’ri on Earth to give what evidence I had. I had no choice but to go, it would have looked too suspicious had I refused. I was not overly helpful to them. I made no mention of the fact, for instance, that I had still been with Mithras when the Pyxyr began their attack to re-take the colony, and that I escaped only because a certain cooperative local offered me a mutually beneficial arrangement. His ship to escape in, along with his knowledge of Pyxyr movements, if I would take him, too, far enough from the colony that he could pretend not to be part of the Goa’uld incursion. When, in fact, he was the source of the information that allowed us to take the colony in the first place.”

Varadin glanced at Amindara, sweating slightly. “Now, now, my very dear Drysa. No need for you to impart every detail of our previous ventures with our good friend Amindara. I’m sure she would be bored to tears by…”

“Actually, my dear partner Varadin, I find myself quite fascinated. So. If I understand correctly, it was Varadin who sold you the location of Iszan colony and aided your taking it – pardon, your master Mithras taking it. And when Pyxyr forces appeared to re-take the colony, you and Varadin slid out the back. So, Varadin, the Goa’uld Mithras paid you and died, and the Pyxyr military no doubt paid you for information on how to approach the colony – which you appeared reluctant to give, I have no doubt, until they agreed to pay you – after which you took yet another fee from
Drysa in order to aid in her escape? Have I all of that correctly?"

“We think alike, my dear Amindara.”

Amindara only smiled expansively at the insult. “And let me further guess that Drysa had in her possession a very unusual and valuable holo-image crystal. You were so taken with it, the question of the identity and value of the Item had to come up between you… You did make the recording, did you not, Drysa?”

The oddly jarring, metallic bifurcated sound of the Tok’ra voice uttered, “I did. A rare, even unique opportunity. There is no substance valuable enough to match that crystal weight for value. Or the man it represents, for that matter. Varadin and I soon realized that if he could find a way to… acquire the… merchandise, and I could find a way to approach Anubis, then we could both become obscenely rich.”

“Obscenely. Yes. I see.”

Drysa’s eyes narrowed. “I have fought the Goa’uld for thousands of years. I have paid in blood and pain. Fanchay, my host, has sacrificed any chance of home, family, mate and children, in order to pursue the dream of a galaxy free of the Goa’uld. I have not believed in that for a very long time. Certainly not since Anubis arose again, now revealed thanks to the very human who brings us together now, as a half-Ascended being and therefore even more formidable and dangerous than we thought, and took his place as supreme head of the System Lords. He will soon rule all. I want to enjoy what little time may be remaining to any of us, to retire to some quiet forgotten corner to the end of my, and Fanchay’s, days. The only way I see this happening is with a great deal of money, and a certain willful blindness on the part of Anubis himself. These I shall soon have. Provided… you have… what do you call him, Varadin? The Item?”

“How did you know the Item would be on Androsi?” Amindara asked.

Drysa shrugged. “I asked. Why should they not tell me? Now. Do you have him? He is secure? I may see him?”

Amindara looked very hard at the Tok’ra. There was a degree of enthusiasm in that cold metallic voice that set her nerves on edge. The same kind of edge they took on the far too frequent occasions when she had found Cob too near the Item’s stasis chamber.

Amindara reflected that it could well be that everyone who looked upon the Item might want it. She was just cynical enough to believe that lust was universal. She had felt the pull herself, looking upon him.

It. It, she reminded herself sternly. The Item. Do not for a moment allow the Item to become a Him, she insisted to a way-ward conscience. The most elementary mistake in the Trade was to view merchandise as anything but that – merchandise. Items for sale to anyone with the price. No matter what the buyer might intend to do with it once possession was transferred… Her only interest in the Item must be to see it remained whole and unimpaired, lest damage devalue it in the eyes of potential buyers.

Drysa/Fanchay did own a share in the potential profit and had therefore a right to assure herself it remained viable. And that being so, there could be no harm in allowing the Tok’ra to view what she had been responsible for yielding to Amindara and Varadin in the first place.

Amindara nodded. She turned to lead the way around Drysa’s small ship to the bank of stasis drawers, Varadin and Mar trailing behind. It should not surprise her to find Cob standing before
the wall of cover plates, scowling at the key pad before him, sealing the only lighted vessel
currently in use.

“Cob,” Amindara said coldly. “I have told you before, your duties do not lie in this hangar. Do you
wish to be restrained?”

Cob stiffened, his dark eyes hooded as he lowered them to her feet. “No, Mistress.”

“I will place a locator upon you. If you venture into the hangar even one more time… you will be
placed in stasis yourself. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“Then leave. Report to Fin and have him fit the locator to you. Do not attempt to remove it.”

“Yes Mistress.” The sullen slave turned and departed.

Amindara repressed a shudder. Drysa watched the slave disappear with speculation, but asked no
questions. Amindara was cautious enough to check the pod log, checking that hers was the last
entry, and the only other hand-prints upon the lock were Mar or Fin’s. Then she activated the
monitor, and once more, the hologram spun out in all of its life-like glory.

A light focused on the still form. His face was smooth and young in sleep, his arms crossed on his
chest. Even now, she smiled upon him, taking delight again in the perfect symmetry of his body,
the color and shadow of his skin, the fine soft strands of his hair. So peaceful, so young, so
beautiful and so vulnerable…

Drysa could no more resist than she, and stroked a hand over the display, as near to touch as she
could come.

“Such a shame…” whispered the human voice of the Tok’ra host.

“What is?”

Fanchay looked up in surprise, evidently having forgotten the other woman was present. “Just
that… he is a beautiful man. And his mind is as beautiful as his body… perhaps more so. It seems
a waste to give him over to Anubis.”

Amindara glared. “It was you who arranged this venture in the first place.”

“I know it. The opportunity… it was too much to resist. But still… I am conscious of a feeling of
regret that it is necessary, and there is no other way…”

I will not ask, Amindara told herself. I do not wish to know. I will not ask. But then she heard
herself saying, “What will Anubis do with hi—the Item?”

The grey-speckled head dipped and Drysa’s cold voice was heard. “Anubis wants the Tau’ri who
was Ascended and yet lives. He wants revenge on the Tau’ri who defied him, challenged him,
sought his destruction, and almost succeeded. He wants the only man who might be able to find
the Lost City of the Ancients, and all the power that is hidden in that place, even though he is well
aware this Tau’ri will do everything in his power to deny him that treasure. For this one, there will
be torments beyond any that even I can imagine. And for Dr. Daniel Jackson, worst torment of all
would be to crumble under the torture, as he inevitably must, and witness what evil Anubis will
wreck on all he holds dear because of him.”
Amindara swallowed on a dry throat. See, she told herself, you really did *not* want to know.

Varadin too, shouldered forward to rest a hand over the image. He gave a sigh, then said, “We can waste no more time. We are already greatly delayed. Will Anubis be waiting at the appointed place, my dear Drysa?”

“No. But I have been in communication with him, and arranged a new rendezvous. Lead me to your peltac, and I will enter the co-ordinates.”

“Come then,” Varadin invited with a gesture, and he left with the Tok’ra.

This time, Amindara did not even turn to look as she said, “Cob, attend your master. Now.”

“Yes, Mistress,” muttered the sulky voice, and she listened carefully to the receding clunks of the big slave’s heavy feet.

Amindara lingered at the case a moment more, Mar at her shoulder.

She mused quietly, as if to herself, “Yes, there are limits to my greed. I wonder, have I finally found one?”

Then she shook herself, and straightened her shoulders, meticulously shutting off the monitor. “Come, Mar. Be sure to lock the hangar behind us. We may require another lock on that door.”

Â
Tricky Negotiations

The Tok’ra woman entered the control cabin, still pulling on her bits and pieces of garment. The Tok’ra had an appalling fashion sense, made up of scraps and rags thrown together as much by guess as design, as far as Amindara could see. This one favored dark tones that covered as much skin as was reasonably possible.

She was complaining even as she walked and buttoned. “Why have we slowed? We are not due to enter the Kanak system for another hour.”

Varadin arrived just a little behind, seeming a little breathless and red in the cheeks… viewing his holo-crystal again, if Amindara was any judge. Just glancing down at the suspicious bulge at her partner’s groin, she smirked. He would be most uncomfortable until he could take care of that, she reflected with, admittedly, petty satisfaction.

“I thought it wise to approach with caution, from a direction they might not expect. We are cloaked, well outside the system still, and our long-range sensors should detect the presence of our buyer.”

She nodded to Fin, who worked both hands and both tentacles feverishly in order to pull the *Marmoset* to a parking position, and activate its sensors. “This will take time, Mistress.”

“We have it,” Amindara assured him. “Having come so far and gone to so much trouble, Anubis will not soon let impatience thwart his desire.”

Fin nodded, and began a slow, painstaking, survey of the entire system. Drysa had arranged for them to meet Anubis upon the planet surface. It was a quiet, unremarkable world, used as a training ground for jaffa troops, since its strategic and mineral value was limited. There was a small outpost there, with a pyramid landing post and several transport ring platforms. There was no Ancients’ Portal on this world. At any rate, there was not one here now, though speculation was rife it once did possess one.

“I have found the planet. There is a small ha’tak parked upon the pyramid. Life signs for many jaffa… over a hundred.” Fin reported and continued to swing the sensors in a search pattern. “Wait… I register more vessels just entering the system from hyperspace… they are slowing… they are taking up positions behind various planetary bodies in the system that will hide them from the post on Kanak.”

“Surprise,” Amindara spat out, glaring at the Tok’ra woman. “A planned ambush.”

Drysa merely shrugged. “It would not be the first time. Anubis may himself be expecting a trap. He may want to assure himself that we do come alone.”

“You mean we should just… fly in there? Land?”

“How else to make the exchange?”

“And if he does intend to betray us?”

“The Goa’uld are unable to penetrate Pyxyr cloaking technology. We can land right beside his post before revealing ourselves. Sooner or later, we will have to trust, or we will never be able to effect
a transfer of merchandise and payment.”

Amindara was forced to agree, though she felt her mouth twist in a sour grimace. She glanced at Varadin, who shrugged, his eyes glowing with avarice at the prospect of the wealth soon to be his. Blind fool. How had he managed to survive so long in the Trade?

Taking the controls herself, Amindara began a slow, cautious approach to the planet, while Fin continued to scan. One more ship appeared on the outer edge of the system. Then another and another. All were modest-sized attack craft.

“Not taking any chances, is he?” Amindara commented.

Then, as they passed the orbital of a gas giant, entering the inner system, still more ships dropped abruptly out of hyper-space, then cruised rapidly into the system. These were not stealthy, not seeming to take any notice of the other ships parked behind every rock and asteroid in the system. These new arrivals sped to Kanak, and settled into orbit.

Drysa, knowing the communication frequencies used by Anubis, was able to take the comm. And focus in on the transmissions between the new arrivals and the planet post.

“You are late. Lord Anubis is most displeased,” barked out a jaffa.

“Our lord is here?”

“No. He has trusted me with this mission. He reposes great confidence in my ability to acquire the Tau’ri slave and bring him back to the Station. Take your positions in the asteroid cloud, and await the arrival of the traitor Tok’ra renegades. They must not suspect your presence until we are ready to surround and take them.”

Amindara settled for one acid glance at the preoccupied Drysa. The Tok’ra switched to the agreed-upon channel for her own communication. She explained off-handedly, “I did not think it necessary to reveal that my partners in this venture were Pyxyr. Did he know that, Anubis would want you captured as well.”

“I am grateful for your restraint.”

Drysa did not even look at Amindara, merely opened communications. “This is Drysa. I have entered the system early. I have the… Item. What are your instructions?”

“We did not detect your arrival,” the startled jaffa almost yelped. “Where are you?”

“It is not necessary that you should know. Where do you wish us to be?”

Disgruntled, the jaffa said, “You are to land by the ha’tak. Then you may come to the hat’ak. Bring the Tau’ri slave. Can you do this?”

“We can. We will attend you shortly.”

Warily, with a warning glance at the nervous but ready Fin, Amindara disengaged the cloak and began descent into lower orbit…

Not one trap to spring, but two.

First, the newest arrivals came screaming out of the asteroid belt, closing in on the planet. And while their backs were turned, focused on the little *Marmoset*, the other ships hidden behind
every bit of debris in the system leapt from hiding to close in on their adversaries. One set of ships fired on the other, and Amindara barked out the order to raise shields, re-engage cloak, and get them the hell out of there.

Stray shots from energy weapons creased and bounced off the *Marmoset* shields. A fully-fledged battle was soon joined, and even the ha’tak on the planet rose and joined the affray. Meanwhile, several scout ships trolled, trying to find them, even as Fin dodged and evaded, working the controls like a madman… or a genius. One lucky shot taken at random managed to crack against them, and a shield fell. Another in the same place caused a hull bulkhead breach. Amindara barked out an order over the ship address system for Mar and Cob to evacuate to the control cabin, immediately. More shots but less strong caused a few dents, but air-tight doors clanged shut everywhere, and the internal safety systems of the *Marmoset* kept the entire ship from depressurizing.

Soon they were out of the system and hanging dead and unseen in open space, watching the mayhem still going on in the system.

“Anubis betrayed us, Drysa. What say you to that?” Amindara challenged. “We would gladly have upheld the contract, yielded him the Item as promised, but he arrived with warships and fired upon us. You said he wanted the Item alive and unharmed!”

“That was not Anubis firing upon you, but my former master, Baal. If Anubis wants a thing, that is reason enough for Baal to go to any lengths to deny him that thing. You’ve become caught between the two mightiest Goa’uld System Lords – never a good place to be.”

“How did this Baal discover our rendezvous?” Amindara demanded, bristling with suspicion. A traitor proved will betray anyone, and this Tok’ra had already betrayed many. Although Amindara could see no advantage to the alien in precipitating such a mess. It served no one but Baal, and only if the System Lord succeeded in destroying her ship.

“All System Lords employ spies,” Drysa shrugged. “It is their way. Baal must have many among Anubis’ ranks.”

“So now what?” Amindara wondered.

Drysa replied. “You must still meet with Anubis in order to gain our payment. We do still have that, do we not?”

“How?” Amindara demanded. “How do you suggest? I saw two fleets of ships attempting to take us, not one, and one of them was definitely of Anubis. Perhaps you might not have noticed, but there is a full-fledged space battle going on out there! We barely escaped! We are now damaged. And we are running out of time in this. If Pyxyr Security catch up with us…”

“Then what do you suggest we do?” Varadin asked.

“First we must repair the ship, or we go nowhere. Then… As I see it, we have few options left. We can attempt to contact Anubis for another meeting. And risk another betrayal. I cannot think of a single way to arrange any such exchange in a way that would be guaranteed safe for us. Can either of you? No? Then… we can submit to Pyxyr Security, plead a delay in receiving the Alert, yield the Item to them to do with him as they please, and depend upon their… mercy.” Even saying the word ‘mercy’ in connection with Pyxyr Security caused Amindara to shudder.

“Are you mad?” Varadin demanded, going very pale, and losing the last shreds of his arousal. “They’ll eviscerate us! If we’re to give up any chance of receiving our payment, better we hit the
red button. Then we run. With no evidence… we may escape with our lives, at least.”

“I am not willing to give up so easily,” Drysa objected. “We do have another option. We can use a go-between to assist us in making the exchange. He has dealt with the Goa’uld before, with some success.”

“And you would trust this go-between?”

“More than we can now trust Anubis. At the very least, Arris Bok will know of a safe way to make the exchange.”

“And you can contact him?”

“In time…”

“We have not a great deal of that.”

“Then let me begin now.”

“And I will set Fin, Mar and Cob on the repairs. Perhaps if you can make contact, we may even be able to limp to this new rendezvous.”
Fin came down the corridor toward the damaged sections of the *Marmoset*, his air distracted, looking for his companion Mar.

The three slaves had worked like fiends the first two days after the battle to repair enough of the damage to hull integrity and the shield generators that the *Marmoset* could re-enter hyper-space. They had yet another rendezvous to make in a matter of days, some distance away. A neutral section of space their Mistress had not known by name. They were hoping once again to get there in advance of the appointed time, in order to watch for potential trouble. However, the engines, overstrained by the damage to shields and the quick exit from Kanak system, had needed some coddling attention from Fin. Their trip through hyper-space was currently limping at half speed to avoid any further stress. They were afraid of opening more ruptures from microscopic faults in the hull and engine casing.

Mar looked up from his work, soldering a replacement plate over a damaged section of hull to encounter a frowning question, “Mar, have you seen my bottle of Tau’ri oil?”

“You have lost it?”

“I can’t locate it anywhere. If I did not know better, I would say Cob took it… he has been watching me closely for days now, and I caught him once already opening my drawer in quarters.” All three slaves shared the slave quarters, a cabin with ten bunks and ten drawers for individual effects.

Mar frowned. “You think he is… interested in you?”

Fin gave a shudder. “No. I am certain my tentacles put him off, at the least.”

“What could he possibly want with the oil, then? I have not noticed he chafes anywhere…”

Fin frowned, contemplating the palm of his hand and rubbing at the thin lubricating film still lingering… Mar noted the motion, and the pair’s eyes met suddenly in horrified realization. Fin dived for a monitor access port on the wall nearby, and activated the internal monitors.

“The locator collar will tell us where he… I can’t detect it. He’s not on the ship!”

“No, Fin. He’s turned it off. Check the hangar access lock.”

“Open. Three minutes ago.”

“You will sound alert to the Mistress. Go!”

Mar struggled from his knees and limped as fast as he could down the corridors of the *Marmoset*, for the hangar. Keening through the ship was the wail of the alert, and then Fin’s voice over the address system. “Mistress. We believe Cob has violated your commands and entered the hangar unauthorized. Mar goes even now to apprehend him.”

Apprehend? A limping, crippled lightweight like himself, to tackle that behemoth? Mar let spill a series of the more imaginative swear-words in his native argot.
The hangar doors stood wide open when he arrived, and so, as he rounded the Tok’ra vessel, did the Item’s receptacle shelf: open, extended and empty. But Mar, standing appalled, fearing he was already too late, heard faint sounds of dragging.

He looked frantically about him for a weapon, wishing he had thought to pass the armory on his way… but all he could see was the half-full bottle of Tau’ri oil, lying on its side on the floor. He absently picked it up, to at least stiffen his fist. He rounded the front of the Tok’ra ship to find Cob had decided he had taken his prize far enough, and was now preparing to enjoy the spoils.

The Item lay sprawled, limbs akimbo, upon the metal hangar deck, while Cob stood over him, grinning, drooling with lust, tunic already discarded and dropping his pants. Mar felt a wave of fury rise within him, remembering all too well his own introduction to Cob, ten years ago… but lord, the man was huge.

No matter.

“Cob. You will stop. Now.”

Cob, perfectly naked, slowly twisted. He took one, negligent look over the other slave, smirked, and ignored him, descending to one knee by the helpless hibernating Tau’ri. Reaching…

With an enraged roar, Mar launched himself at the big man, and succeeded only in making Cob weave slightly side to side, like a tree in a wind, not even managing to knock him down. Cob laughed even as Mar wrapped himself limpet-like around the monster, pounding on his back.

“You shall not touch him, beast,” Mar gritted out. Cob tried to pry the slave off him, failed, then decided to take more effective action. He stood and charged for the Tok’ra ship bulkhead, slamming Mar against it once, twice, three times. Mar cried out at the crushing pain, but held on. Now more seriously annoyed, Cob twisted and yanked on Mar’s weaker limbs, till he had the man thrown to the deck, then he kicked once. Mar squirmed away, but not fast enough to avoid Cob’s hands, gripping at him about the neck and squeezing.

“What, little cripple, jealous? Wanting more of what we had so long ago? I believe I can accommodate you and still have some left for the choice morsel over there.” Clothing ripped. Mar struggled in an iron grip, fighting for breath, fury turning abruptly to cold terror. His nightmares were still haunted by a large, dark shape taking him roughly and painfully… not again. Not again!

Mar croaked out in anger, his fist slamming into Cob’s wall-like chest even as the last of his own garments were shredded and cast aside. The force of his blow popped the top off the small bottle in his fist, and liquid spurted everywhere. And suddenly, even Cob’s grip slid and slipped. No grip could be tight enough with the lubricating fluid covering both naked bodies. Mar slid right out of that abhorrent embrace. They tackled and grappled, true, but neither could do more than squeeze until the other gushed out of whatever hold they were in. A smear of glistening liquid oozed across the hangar deck as well.

In the titanic (and now somewhat ludicrous) battle, Mar didn’t even hear the arrival of his Mistress, Varadin and the Tok’ra. All he saw was a mauve light, then Cob fell, with a crash, right on top of him, unconscious. Once again, the lubricant enabled Mar to slip easily from beneath the weight. He staggered to his feet, panting, feeling his face heat red with embarrassment at his nakedness. The three masters stood around Cob, regarding him dispassionately.

“Now will you listen, Varadin?” Amindara challenged coldly.

Varadin merely shrugged. “Very well. He disobeyed both our commands. I still think he would just
have used the Item then put him back little the worse for wear... But if he can no longer be trusted with property, he is no longer of any use to either of us. You may do as you will with him, Amindara."

"Thank you," Amindara said coldly.

"What will you do?" the Tok'ra asked, mildly curious.

"I told him I would eject him from the ship. You see the red buttons on the receptacles? That will do it. Mar, see it is done, as soon as you have re-settled the Item. Has he taken any hurt?"

"I do not think so, Mistress. Not even a bruise."

"Well then, see to him first. Then dispose of Cob. Then... clean yourself up and dress yourself."

"Yes, Mistress," he said mildly, with a deep bow.

Then she left, with Varadin and the Tok’ra in tow. Mar picked up Fin’s little bottle, retrieved the top and screwed it back on. There wasn’t much left, but Fin planned to do a chemical analysis so he could fabricate his own version, and for that he needed only a little.

Mar was very gentle with the Item. He used the hangar grapple drones to pick up the much larger and heavier body to carry to the receptacle, then resealed the Item in his drawer. The stasis effects had not had long enough outside the receptacle to lift... the Item had not so much as blinked. Then, with a wide anticipatory grin, Mar approached the still-unconscious Cob.

The receptacle med field brought the large slave fully awake. But when the cycle was complete, and Mar opened the drawer, he left the case lid in place. He knew Cob, staring up at him, could hear his every word.

"I have been commanded by my Mistress, and by your Master, to dispose of you, Cob. I will enjoy this. I woke you purposely so that I could watch your face as I seal you in and hit the red button. I will not engage stasis first. You will know it is coming, Cob, and you will feel the first shock of it, but I understand the incineration process is too quick to feel any true pain. And once you are ash, there are no nerves to carry any such feelings. You are going to die now, Cob. Good bye. The universe will not miss you. At all."

He did watch the frantic panic in the big man’s eyes, the futile pounding on the transparent case, his voice screaming threats, begging, promises, even as the drawer slid into place, the end abutting the bulkhead, and the cover plate slid down. Mar hit the red button, hard. He stood waiting while the monitors mapped the activity, the incineration completed, the ejection, and the final sterilization sequence. Only when the lights turned off, the receptacle reset to dormant waiting status, did Mar stand back. He glanced briefly to the only active panel, and he sighed.

"The universe would miss you, though, would it not, Dr. Daniel Jackson?"

With another troubled sigh, Mar left the hangar, almost careless of locking the door behind him. There was no longer any need for extraordinary measures to protect the peacefully sleeping Item.

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Arris Bok stood on the bridge of the Pyxyr stinger-class patrol vessel, watching the stars spin back to stationary position as they dropped out of the hyperspace corridor. The commander stood to his left, even now verifying that the rest of his small fleet was still with him, and regaining position. The Pyxyr Security agent stood to his right, as eager as he to hear that their little ambush would be successful. The commander barked out orders, and the ten ships scattered to various hiding places within the near-by pre-nebular gas clouds. It was possible that the quarry was already here, similarly lurking, but Arris thought not. They were here well in advance of the appointed meeting time, and after hearing the news from Kanak, the small-scale battle that had erupted between the forces of Baal and Anubis, each losing half a fleet with very few casualties able to limp away after, Arris wouldn’t be surprised to learn that the Tok’ra Drysa’s ship had also taken damage.

The Pyxyr Security agent stepped forward to view sensors. All around him, members of the Pyxyr regular forces edged uneasily away. Even the Commander seemed uncomfortable in the agent’s presence. He took this opportunity to lean toward the bounty hunter.

“So. My friend Bok. You have actually *met* Dr. Daniel Jackson?”

“I had that pleasure, yes, along with the rest of SG-1.”

“So… what is he truly like, this Tau’ri? Is he worth all the botheration?”

Bok smiled wryly, remembering wide ingenuous blue eyes behind wire-rim spectacles… an endlessly curious mind… not at all surprised or even disappointed to hear he was only worth a day’s rations. His price had gone up a bit of late. But still, in Bok’s humble opinion, under-valued.

“Oh yeah. He’s worth it. You *will* let me return him to the Tau’ri when we’ve got him?”

The Security agent straightened at that, glancing over his shoulder. “Eventually,” he replied coldly.

Arris swung around. “Eventually? What’s that supposed to mean? Look, you can’t just toss him back through the Stargate, you know. The Tau’ri have a barrier on their Gate. But I can take him off your hands... for only a modest increase in my fee. Call it a merit bonus. There’s a number of worlds I can drop him off and they’ll contact Earth to come and get him, or he’ll know an address himself where he can obtain help. Either way, there’s no need for you to worry about contact with any aliens.”

“That is not the point,” the agent said. “We will indeed avail ourselves of your delivery service. Eventually. But not until we have ensured that the Tau’ri will take no memories with him back to his people.”

Arris glanced at the uncomfortable Commander. “A replication centre? A memory purge? That’s... a bit drastic, isn’t it? After all, what could he know? He’s been a prisoner of the Tok’ra renegade for most of this time.”

“We do not know what he may or may not know of the Pyxyr Empire right now. The Tok’ra herself is a significant danger and will be dealt with. There are Pyxyr citizens also involved in this, and we can not be certain what information they may have imparted, both to the slave… to the Tau’ri, and to the Tok’ra renegade. We cannot allow either of them to remember anything they may have learned.”
“Yes, but…”

“Arris,” the Commander warned, pushing the bounty hunter to a discrete distance. “Take care how you speak to any agent of Pyxyr Security. Their mandate to judge, incarcerate and punish is absolute. You’re very lucky to be able to operate as you do within Pyxyr ken – you’re one of only a handful of aliens permitted this license, since we do sometimes require some access to the outside. But be warned. Pyxyr Security can always revise your status. You could easily find yourself on a slab in a replication centre, right next to the Tau’ri. Believe me, you do not want to run such a risk.”

Arris swallowed and glanced out at the empty space of the rendezvous spot. When the Tok’ra had first contacted him, he thought he had been handed a golden opportunity to gain the favor not only of the Pyxyr, but of the Tau’ri as well. It never hurt to build up credit with the few beings prepared to seek, find and give him a cure for roshna addiction… but it was beginning to look like contacting the Pyxyr authorities first, rather than waiting till he had possession of the good Doctor and could pass him straight on to the Tau’ri, was a bit of a miscalculation.

Trust him to screw up whenever he tried to play the good guy.

“They’ll be cloaked,” the Security Agent said. “We’ll need them to drop the cloak. But they expect to see Bok’s ship, and only him. So, Bok, if you would be so good as to detach your ship from tow, and prepare to meet your… friends?”

The Commander winced, even as he glanced apologetically at Bok. The bounty hunter set his mouth in a thin, grim line as he made his way to his ship.

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The trip was long, difficult and frustrating, fraught with engine trouble and shield failures that would abruptly drop the *Marmoset* out of the hyperspace corridor. The third time, Amindara gave the order for Fin to perform a complete diagnostic and overhaul before they attempted another jump. Varadin complained bitterly about this, and Drysa looked grave, but neither had the necessary expertise to aid in the repairs to the ship. So Amindara and Fin together set about patching what they could. Mar kept a lonely vigil in the control cabin, coordinating the repair efforts. One persistent problem in the shield control interface brought Fin to the control cabin on the second day. Mar watched his companion slave open a panel, pull out a plate of crystals, and use his roll of silver adhesive ribbon to attach a lead.

Mar shifted uneasily. “You’re using that Tau’ri stuff to fix the ship?”

“It is proving to be extraordinarily useful, Mar. Versatile and effective in a wide range of applications, just like that wondrous oil. I’m thinking the Mistress may want to submit a patent on both the ribbon and the oil when we return home. Either one would prove far more lucrative and reliable a source of income than the Trade.”

“The Mistress does not expect to need to worry about income for the rest of her life. Should we complete this venture successfully.”

“Ah. Yes. And… what do you estimate are the odds now?”

Mar sighed. “Not good.”

Fin grinned, waving the roll of silver ribbon. “Then it is good we have this in reserve.”

“Mm. Should we survive the venture at all. The odds on that are just as long.”
Fin shrugged. “We are alive now. If death should come… not much we can do about that. Now. Activate the shields, would you, Mar?”

Amindara and Fin continued into the third day with their repairs, when Varadin and Drysa sought her out.

“How much longer, my dear Amindara,” Varadin grated out. “We are already a day late for our rendezvous with Bok, and it will take at least a day more to reach our destination.”

“I am doing my best, Varadin. But the damage was extensive. This ship was never meant to sustain battle with two Goa’uld fleets! The shields are back up, but the engines remain unreliable.”

“Can we move, or not?”

“For short jumps through hyperspace, yes. But if we overstrain, we risk doing permanent damage that I cannot repair, and ending up stranded out here, far from any possible rescue. The ship does not have unlimited resources, Varadin. In fact, in another day, we will need to start eating the food we scavenged from the Tau’ri packs.”

“We do, however, have an alternate transport,” Drysa suggested. “My ship also has cloaking technology, and far more weaponry than yours. In fact, the only lack is the stasis chambers we are using to keep Dr. Jackson asleep and acquiescent. Therefore, I suggest we run the *Marmoset* to its maximum capacity to reach the rendezvous point, then, once we establish that Bok can handle the exchange, you and Varadin will accompany Bok with the Item in his ship, while I follow in my own. At that point we may abandon the *Marmoset*. Once we have our payment, we will only need transport to suitable places to begin our new lives. Agreed?”

Amindara laid a hand on the metal surface of her ship, and sighed. “You are assuming all goes well from here. That is assuming a great deal with very little evidence judging by our experience so far in this venture. However… very well.” Amindara stood, stretched, and went to the nearest address access. She made a call to Fin.

“Fin, I know you have not yet finished with the engine interface, but cease work now and close up. We are going to use secondary engines to capacity to reach the rendezvous. We launch to hyperspace in ten. Join me and Mar in the control cabin.”

Amindara bowed to her two partners, then went herself to the control cabin to set the navigation. Mar shifted over, looking hard at his Mistress. But with Varadin and Drysa following close behind, she held up a warning hand with a private signal commanding silence. When Fin arrived a little later, eyes wide in surprise and question, Amindara gave him the same signal, and gestured for him to take his post.

“All I want to know is this, Fin. Will the engines operate? Will they get us to the rendezvous?”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“Then let us go.”

The repairs that they had completed managed to keep the *Marmoset* in the hyperspace corridor for the better part of a day, before they abruptly cut out again, and Amindara, taking a quick look at the dials on her diagnostic sensors, reported to Drysa, “That is it. They’re dead and will not be revived. The *Marmoset* will not enter hyperspace again,” Amindara reported.

As she finished, Varadin raced into the cabin. “Why have we stopped? Are we there?”
“Not there, not quite, but close. We can limp the rest of the way at sub-light. We should be in communication range in an hour or so. Is this acceptable?”

“It should suffice,” Drysa admitted. “Do we have cloaking capability?”

“No.”

Fin and Mar exchanged glances at that, but kept silent. They had not said a word, in fact, either of them, since the repair rest.
The small vessel limped toward the pre-stellar nebula and again, Amindara had her sensors operating at maximum. There was one stationary vessel there, a construction that had Goa’uld origin written all over it, though the energy signatures were unusual for that.

“It’s Bok,” Drysa assured them all. “When he doesn’t trade with the Goa’uld, he steals from them, then up-grades with bits and pieces he collects from other races. He is alone.”

“He appears to be,” Amindara confessed grudgingly.

Drysa leaned forward to press the communication key. It was already set to the pre-arranged frequency for Bok’s ship.

“My friend Bok. This is Drysa. Are you prepared for boarding?”

“Drysa. You’re late. What kept you?”

“We were somewhat unlucky in our previous trading encounter with Anubis. As I revealed to you earlier, it is why we sought your assistance in this venture.”

“Somewhat unlucky? But you are alive. And you still have the merchandise?”

“We do. That is why I said ‘somewhat’ unlucky. Are you willing to help us?”

“Let me get this straight. You want me to act as go-between, between you and Anubis, so you can sell him Dr. Daniel Jackson. Correct?”

“Correct. Will you help?”

“Sure, I’ll help. I can get a message to Anubis, and I know the very place to set up a meet, to limit any… accidents and potential unluckiness. But it’ll cost ya, big. I want half.”

Amindara looked grim, while Varadin squealed out, “Half?”

Drysa also looked unhappy with the offer.

“We are talking about a very large treasure here, Bok. Enough for all of us without the need for any of us to get greedy. Will you entertain a counter-offer?” Drysa suggested.

“Perhaps. Why don’t you come a little closer, you can board my ship or I’ll come to you, and we’ll talk.”

“We will come to you.”

“I don’t suppose you could bring Dr. Jackson when you come? Just so I can be assured he’s still in… salable condition.”

“There is no need. We will join you shortly.”

Amindara took the controls from Fin to slide them forward into position next to Bok’s ship.
“Do you have rings to come over?” Bok asked.

“We do,” Drysa said.

The communication channel shut down with the flick of a switch, and Drysa turned, smiling to her partners. “Well. Shall you both join me? My ship has rings and we can operate from your hangar if you open the bay doors.”

“Mar and Fin, remain here, and keep careful watch,” the Dealer commanded as she joined the Broker and the Tok’ra.

They had almost reached the hangar when the ship address system blared out warnings.

“Mistress! Ambush!” shouted Mar’s voice. “Pyxyr forces, a lot of them, all around us!”

All three broke into a run for the hangar. “What do you think to do now?” Amindara demanded angrily, even as she had to surge forward to open the hangar doors. “I told you, the *Marmoset* cannot go anywhere!”

“My ship can,” Drysa said grimly.

“But first we must ensure there is no evidence,” Varadin declared.

Amindara followed the other two into the hangar. While Drysa made at once for her ship, to prep for flight, Varadin detoured around to the stasis capsules. Amindara trailed behind him.

“You cannot be serious! Varadin. It’s too late for that! Get in the ship. The automatic controls for the hangar bay doors were part of the damage we never had time to repair... I must operate them manually from the panel outside the hangar in the corridor. The shields will prevent depressurization, at least long enough for me to get back inside and board with you.”

“And if they take us? There must be no evidence, Amindara. How long does it take to push a red button?”

Varadin made his way purposefully toward the bank of stasis chambers. But the *Marmoset* gave a sudden lurch. The address system blared out, “Mistress! They fire on us! They demand we shut down, drop shields, and allow ourselves to be boarded!”

“Get on the ship, Varadin.”

“After I do this...” But as Varadin strode forward, he hit a slick patch on the hangar floor, some kind of thin oily residue that seemed to have been painted all around the stasis wall. His feet slid, his legs went out from under him, and he fell, slamming ass first on the metal floor. He tried to get his feet back under him, but they kept skidding away. Eventually, he propelled himself with his hands away from the wall, until he could grab a runner edge on the Tok’ra ship and pull himself to his feet.

“What the hell is that?”

“I have no idea. Mar dropped some Tau’ri lubricating fluid on the floor when he fought Cob. We’ve had other things to do than clean up, Varadin. Don’t waste any more time. Get on the ship.” The engines were already powered up, and Drysa, visible in the fore windows, was gesturing urgently. “Hurry. And wait for me.”

Varadin glowered at the one lit access cover plate, but proceeded to step gingerly around to the
Tok’ra ship hatch. He entered, the hatch closed, and Amindara exited the hangar, closing the doors behind her – another security feature, since the hangar bay doors would not open unless the doors to the corridor were properly sealed.

But even as the bay doors retracted on space, showing a small fleet of Pyxyr ships rapidly bearing down on them, the *Marmoset* gave another lurch, and the shield abruptly dropped, a faint blue line passing over the gaping hole even as the hangar abruptly gushed out its remaining air into space.

“We cannot wait.” Drysa declared.

Varadin, with a small resigned sigh, shrugged and said, “Go.”

“She is your friend, your partner. She is doomed on the *Marmoset*, with no way to escape your Security forces.”

“So?”

As soon as the bay doors left enough gap, Drysa lit her engines and flew her ship out into space. Into the middle of a cloud of bright purple Pyxyr energy weapons fire. She activated her shields and cloaking device…

…and nothing happened.

“Get us out of here!” Varadin begged, cringing as shot after shot rattled the Tok’ra ship.

“I can’t! Something’s wrong… take the controls.”

“Take the controls!” Varadin protested. “I’ve never seen these controls before, and I can’t read Goa’uld!”

Drysa wasted no time on her surviving partner, but ran to an access panel to pull out the shelf of bright-lit crystals. All but three, not just dead, but missing entirely. One crystal for life-support, one for communications… and one just now dying to control the engines… But how could that…

Drysa hurried back to the peltak, and activated the sensors. “Where is the *Marmoset*?” she demanded.

“Why it’s just behind us…”

But as they turned in a complete circle, all they saw, in every direction, was Pyxyr ships. And Bok.

“Drysa?” the bounty hunter’s voice came over the comm. “I suggest you surrender. Now. You’re surrounded, and your shields and cloak won’t work against Pyxyr sensors, and I doubt any of your weapons will work worth a damn either. Surrender.”

“To Pyxyr Security?” Varadin yelped. “No!”

Drysa sighed. She said to her partner, “Why not? We do not have the Item, do we? There is no evidence to link us to him. We have no choice. Amindara has arranged this too well.”

Varadin collapsed to a chair.

The Tok’ra vessel did indeed surrender, Drysa and Varadin were taken into custody, and a complete search was made of the ship. Although no trace of Dr. Daniel Jackson was found, there was proof of a kind… in the food stores, several silver packages of food, marked in Tau’ri letters.
Bok was able to read them. “Meals Ready to Eat. Property of USAF. Macaroni and cheese, and chicken vol-au-vent.”

The Pyxyr Security Agent smiled a feral smile at the two prisoners. “More than enough proof. I do not know what you did with the accursed Tau’ri. Probably dropped him in space somewhere. That is regrettable, but at least there will never be any proof that a citizen of the Pyxyr Empire is responsible for this. However. The possible repercussions upon us for your treasonous and criminal act must be punished to the fullest extent of our mandate. I am sure the replication centre will be fascinated by the opportunity to study a Tok’ra, and render you down to constituent parts. The possession of a Goa’uld symbiote will no doubt mean more of your tissues will be usable before final degradation ultimately renders you unviable. Commander, take them away. Thank you for your participation, Bok.”

“Wait a minute… what about Daniel Jackson? He’s not here. You don’t seriously think they would have spaced him? With the value…”

“Looking at the penalties for being caught in possession of the Tau’ri, yes, I am certain that is just what they did, as soon as they discovered our presence, and before our random firing damaged their cloaking device to render them visible to us.”

“You aren’t going to look for the body?”

“Chances of finding such a small piece of organic debris are unlikely, and what would be the point?”

“We could at least let the Tau’ri know… return the remains…” Bok gulped. Did he *really* want to be the one to return a dead Daniel Jackson to the SGC? Umm… No!

Meanwhile, Drysa, even now being hauled off to the air-lock with the Pyxyr transport shuttle, struggled to twist back around. “Wait! Daniel Jackson is still alive! He’s aboard the other vessel!”

“What other vessel?” the Commander demanded, mystified.

“The other ship! The Pyxyr ship, the *Marmoset*!”

“There was no other ship. Just you, dropping out of cloak when we hit you with enough of our energy blasts.”

Drysa blinked then roared. “She lied to us! It was all a trick… Varadin, she betrayed us! Listen, there is another ship, it was cloaked, my ship was in the hold… I never uncloaked, you just saw us emerge from the other cloaked ship! She, Amindara, has Dr. Daniel Jackson, safe and alive, in stasis. She’s getting away even now!”

Bok listened with a small spark of hope… If true, and if this Amindara did indeed still have a live Dr. Jackson and was even now escaping with him out of Pyxyr reach… was it possible? As it was, the good doctor at least stood some kind of chance, because Bok knew, as this unmet, unknown accomplice was no doubt coming to realize, there was no safe way to collect on the bounty on this human Tau’ri. But would she just do as the Security Agent suggested, and space him, to rid herself of the evidence?

Bok kept silent.

“A transparent ruse to distract us,” the Security Agent declared with certainty. “Commander, we now have what we came for. Let us return to the Home world with all dispatch.”
Bok stared out at empty-seeming space, and he wondered. There was some weird kind of higher power guiding and preserving the life of one naive, passionate, beautiful and befuddled archeologist. Perhaps it would save him this time, too.
Amindara, Fin and Mar sat silent in the darkened control cabin of the *Marmoset*, watching as the last of the Pyxyr fleet sped away, with the Tok’ra ship in tow. Then they waited a while longer, until Bok’s ship powered up and vanished into hyper-space. Then they waited a little longer… until one last hidden ship (of no design Amindara recognized off-hand, although it was somewhat reminiscent of Asgard design) uncloaked, put up its shields, opened a worm-hole and sped away. And even then, they waited another three days.

Only then did Amindara give a gesture Fin interpreted as permission to leave this place. There was an uninhabited world Amindara knew of with a Pyxyr refueling station long abandoned, where they could land to complete the re-fits, and also restock air, water and food. That was to be their first port of call.

Mar, eyeing his Mistress curiously, ventured. “We did not tell them our engines and cloak were operable. We led them to believe the *Marmoset* could not escape undetected.”

“True,” Amindara admitted. “I must have neglected to apprise them of our changed status in all the excitement. A pity Drysa was so anxious to put to space and leave the three of us behind to suffer the consequences. A most cold-blooded and impolite thing to do, typical of a spiritual cousin of the Goa’uld, Tok’ra though she may call herself. I am also disappointed in Varadin’s apparent eagerness to leave me behind to a terrible fate. Disappointed, but not, I must admit, terribly surprised.” After all, she knew her partner very well. Well enough to trust his reactions in most situations.

“You used almost the last of my Tau’ri oil,” Fin observed.

“A most versatile substance. I will assist you in making more, Fin. We may even seek to replicate and market it ourselves, given the opportunity.”

“Mistress, if I may ask… what did you do with it?”

“I had a little accident next to the Item’s chamber. Mar, you’ll need to clean it up before long. It’s a significant safety hazard at the moment. Anyone could slip and fall if they approach our Item now.”

Fin and Mar traded glances.

It was Mar who said, “Mistress, if I may be so bold… the Item. What are we to do with it?”

“We could still attempt to sell it.”

“We haven’t been very successful so far, and we’ve run out of contacts, Mistress.”

“True. Or we could punch the red button. That would indeed rid us of the problem.”

“True,” Mar agreed, shifting uneasily, even as Fin did. “Or… we could put him back where we got him…?”

“That is indeed another of the several options open to us. I will consider them all carefully as we
attempt to refit and restock."

“Yes, Mistress…”

A long, baited silence settled over the last remnants of the wildest of funted ventures.

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“Unscheduled off-world activation!”

The facility scrambled, the drill automatic. SF’s pounding through the blast doors to take position, bristling with P-90’s aimed up the ramp. The iris grinding shut even as the bright reflections from the opening wormhole splashed against the concrete wall in back of the Stargate. And, up in the control room, a row of anxious faces watching, waiting.

“No GDO code,” the tech sergeant reported.

There was a loud bang, of something slamming against the iris – disintegrating in the micron of space that was insufficient to allow matter to re-form. Major Carter ran analysis on the debris as those around her grew more tense.

“It was inanimate,” she reported, with a tinge of relief.

“Someone threw a brick at us?” Jack asked.

“Trace amounts of naquadah…”

“A bomb?” General Hammond wanted to know.

“No, sir. It was just a trace, along with much larger quantities of granite, silicon, asbestos, lime… It’s a composite substance, sir. In precise ratios… A brick, just like the Colonel said…” Sam frowned as the numbers plotted a constituent graph on her console screen. Then she abruptly paled. “My God… I recognize this combination. It’s very distinctive… it’s from P4C 918. Androsi. Where we lost Daniel!”

“A message,” Teal’c guessed. “From Danieljackson, to inform us he is there.”

“Sir! Permission to—“ Jack began, but Hammond forestalled him.

The General grabbed a mike and commanded, “Get a MALP down there ready to go, ten minutes ago! Sergeant, dial P4C 918 immediately. SG1, suit up. If it looks safe…”

“Sir!” Jack rapped out, backing then racing his team-mates to the gear-up room.

It took five minutes, no more, to send through the MALP. By the time they had an image, Jack, Sam and Teal’c were rushing back to Hammond’s side.

Once again, it was snowing on Androsi, a thick but lazy fall of fluffy white flakes. Just on the edge of the grey-white veil of visibility the looming shadow of Daniel’s snowman could be seen, much more lop-sided than before, its top-most ball having fallen. And next to the decapitated head, there was a new lump marring the pristine whiteness. A bundle of dark grey cloth, fast disappearing under a white and thickening natural blanket.

“Zoom in on that,” Hammond requested.

The lump moved…
“SG1, you have a go. See what the hell that is!”

They all knew what they hoped it was…

“But be careful,” Hammond reminded them. “It can’t have been placed there more than ten minutes ago, or it would be covered in snow by now. Whoever left it may still be around.”

SG1 erupted onto the Stargate dais, weapons ready and eyes seeking all around the clearing, and into the snowy air above. No tracks in the snow, no sign of anything… but then, there had never been sign of anything the pixies did. Only the results. And now, only that bundle in the snow.

Jack gave the signal, and they moved out, flanking the bundle, still hoping, still fearing, still ready for this to be a cruel trick of some kind, a trap. While Jack and Teal’c stood guard, Sam knelt by the bundle, and pulled up one corner.

“Daniel!” Sam cried out joyfully. She caressed his unruly hair, felt his warm cheek, prodded his bare shoulder. “Daniel?”

He mumbled something and rolled away.

“Daniel! Wake up!”

“G’way, Sam… too early…”

Jack was down on one knee, and he too, could not resist touching that face. “Come on, Dr. Jackson. Rise and shine!”

“G’t’hell, J’ck,” the faint voice grumbled, pulling the edge of the blanket back around himself.

Jack tried to pry the cloth loose from Daniel’s tight fist, only to discover… he was naked under there. And amazingly hard to wake. Daniel had never been much of a morning person.

“You two feel any sign of unwanted hitchhikers?” Jack asked Sam and Teal’c.

When they shook their heads, Jack sighed.

“Sir, remember how much trouble we had waking after we were hit by those pixie sticks,” Sam said. “Daniel could still be feeling the same effects.”

Jack nodded. “Let’s get him home then. Let ol’ Doc Fraiser have the pleasure of waking Dr. Slug-a-bed here. Dial us out, Major.”

But he was smiling, then grinning, then grinning ear-to-ear, like his companions.

Daniel was back. He was home.

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Hovering just above the Portal, Amindara’s ship trained remote viewers on the departing Tau’ri.

Amindara sighed. She could only hope the people of the Earth’s Star Gate Command would take better care of their priceless treasure in future. If not… well, she had taken the precaution of coating him liberally with pyxy dust. The halo of tiny undetectable recording sensors would wear away and degrade in time, but while they lingered about him, she would always know where he was, and would be able to watch… over… him.
Having her hologram recorders running full time, capturing every living, breathing moment of the life of the Ite—of Dr. Daniel Jackson, would be of secondary importance. Enjoyable, fascinating and lucrative, secondary importance.

“Take us home, Fin,” she requested. “Mar, I believe we will be changing occupations as soon as we return to the Empire.”

“Indeed, mistress?”

“Perhaps the radicals are correct in this instance. There may be a certain… distasteful moral element in the Trade. When we return home, I will write out freedom papers for all of my staff. Then we will discuss terms for forming a partnership in a new venture.”

“And what will that be, mistress?”

Amindara grinned, inserting the small amethyst that Varadin had left her as his legacy in the console receptacle and playing a tiny version of that precious first recording.

“The sale of pornography.”

There was such a thing, after all, as being *too* righteous…

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“Well, sir…” Dr. Fraiser hesitated. “He’s… well rested.”

There was a beat of silence at the briefing table.

“That’s all?” General Hammond demanded. The others glanced at him, wondering where the hint of offense came from.

“And he’s… clean.”

“Clean?” Somehow, this sounded even worse. Dr. Fraiser hastened to explain. A classic error.

“We thought we might get some clue from residue on his skin, in his crev—… um… we thought we might find trace amounts of pollen, dust, that sort of thing, something that might at least indicate where he was taken.” The good doctor had obviously become a fan of CSI. “But he’s clean. I’d say almost sterile. And there were no other effects at all, sir. None. Unless you count…”

“Yes, doctor?”

“Um… We did detect evidence of a substance almost identical to…”

Everyone held their breath…

“Lanolin.”

“You mean, like… hand-cream?” the General demanded.

“Yes.”

“Where—“

“Everywhere, sir. Um… everywhere external, on his epidermis… um…”

“As far as we can tell, sir… yes. And that really is all that happened to him, physically speaking. We did check. I ran every test we know of and then some.”

Daniel mumbled something in a language that might not have been English, and rolled on his side. Jack smiled, recognizing the signs of a slowly surfacing consciousness. Daniel’s eyelids fluttered, the eyes behind them roving over the landscapes of his dreams, and his face would form expressions at once comical and endearing – eyebrows lifting and falling, mouth forming an ‘O’ and working in words only he understood, those adorable three vertical lines forming above his nose and then vanishing.

How many mornings had Jack spent just like this, enraptured, watching his beloved awaken? Not nearly enough. And thank God it hadn’t been for the last time. Jack realized he might never know what happened out there, or what miracle had brought Daniel back to him, but he fully intended to take the fullest advantage of every priceless second he was given with the man he loved.

And who the hell had left the sap on? Thank God Daniel wasn’t awake to catch the dopey smile plastered across his face. But then... That’s what he liked best about these unguarded moments alone with Daniel, watching him sleep. It was the only time he was able to let his inner sap run free and uncontested.

Unable to resist, he reached out to smooth back the soft, short hair at the side of the sleeping man’s face.

The mumble became an automatic grumble of protest,” J’ck… don’… too early…”

And that, too, was part of every morning together that didn’t begin to the jarring drill of an alarm clock.

“It’s not early, Daniel,” Jack said, voice low, smile tender. “It’s late. Real late. You want to wake up now?”

Daniel’s blue eyes cracked open and he frowned resentfully. Then he frowned in puzzlement. Then those beautiful eyes popped wide, and he lurched up with a gulp.

“Oh no. Infirmary? Again?”

Jack nodded with a grin.

“What happened this time?” Daniel wailed, groping on the bedside for… Jack passed him his glasses. “Thank you. I didn’t die again, did I?”

“No, no, just fell asleep. You don’t remember?”

“I…” Daniel frowned, anxious for a moment, probably worried he might have lost even more of his shredded memories. “We were on Androsi, P4C 918, at the ruins and… SG3 went home, we had lunch, had a snow-ball fight, which Teal’c won of course, we built snowmen… I went back to work… Sam and Teal’c!”

“They’re fine, I’m fine, you’re fine. Everyone is fine, Daniel. And you’re home and safe.”
As if to underline that fact, Sam and Teal’c arrived, eyes shooting straight to Daniel, two grins of welcome and relief brightening the drab military grey of the Infirmary.

“Hi guys,” Daniel greeted, smiling sheepishly, embarrassed, as ever, by the signs he might be the cause of strain in his three friends, his family. “Sorry... I don’t know what happened. I just fell asleep? Just like that? And there’s nothing wrong with me?”

“You were stolen by pixies,” Teal’c told him gravely.

Daniel blinked. Then he grinned, then he laughed delightedly. “Good one, Teal’c. No, seriously. What happened?”

“No, seriously,” Jack assured his beloved, enjoying this immensely. “T’s got it right, Daniel. We were attacked, some kind of super zat type gun, put us all out cold. They abducted you, left the rest of us behind. That was twenty-one days ago. Teal’c says the only race that has weapons like those are pixies. They’re real shy… even the Asgard didn’t know how to contact them.”

“So… how did I get here then?” Daniel asked, obviously still suspecting some kind of practical joke at his expense. God, every emotion was so transparent, Jack thought… Now his archeologist was studying them all for signs of a crack, when one of the haggard and strained faces would clear and laughter would ring out. Not Teal’c obviously, Jack’s poker-playing prowess was legendary, so… “Sam?”

There was no crack or clearing in her face as she edged closer, taking Daniel’s hand and holding it painfully tight, as if it really had been twenty-one days of not knowing, of helplessly waiting, while hope gradually died, and the official command had come to stop looking…

“They… whoever they are, brought you back to Androsi. They dialed Earth, tossed through a brick so we could identify the source by the signature it left against the iris, and when we went back… there you were.”

A shiver went down Daniel’s back as he slowly, grudgingly, began to accept that maybe…

“But… I feel fine!” He moved his shoulders, flexed arms and legs. “I certainly don’t feel like I’ve been asleep for twenty-one days. I feel a little bit hungry, but no more than usual in the morning…”

Sam shrugged. “Maybe they kept you in stasis, Daniel. We don’t really know. We probably won’t ever know. But it doesn’t matter, because you’re home now. And you’re safe.”

Jack figured the enormity of it all would hit Daniel once he got back to the quiet and solitude of his office. And, being Daniel, the curiosity would hit him hardest. What, who, why, how? And, as Sam had said, he would probably never know. That would pretty much drive the peaceful explorer crazy. So, after an hour or so, like a warm hug, Jack was there at his door.

“Ready to go home?”

“Yeah… yeah. I’m never going to get caught up in one day. It’s going to take me a week to answer all the e-mails alone. You guys just… left all this waiting for me? No one moved into my office?”

“Not this time. We were too sure you’d come back. You always come back.”

Jack looked at his friend, seeing more than Daniel no doubt wanted him to. But then Daniel didn’t know just how close they really were… or had been, once. “Seriously, Daniel. They abducted you, took you to a spa for twenty one days, then sent you home. That’s it. Really.”
“Jack…”

“No, Daniel. No. You’re okay. Doc Fraiser said so. Nothing bad happened to you, and now it’s over. I know you want answers, explanations, reasons, hell, so do I. And I know you’re going to want to think this to death. But don’t. Don’t go worrying at it like a dog with a bone. Just… let it go. Okay?”

“I’ll… try. It’s just…”

“What?”

“It’s just what I needed, another big honkin’ hole in my life.”

Jack shrugged with a twisted smile. “Twenty one days isn’t so honkin’ big. Not by Jackson standards, anyway. So. Ready to go home?”

Daniel looked up, smiling. Jack felt the need, the hunger barely suppressed and restrained raging for release, vibrating in his tall, rangy body…

“Oh yeah. I’m ready.”

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Jack pulled in front of Daniel’s house and parked at the curb. He kept his hands on the wheel, because if he didn’t, he’d be reaching for Daniel, trying to hold him, pull him closer, touch him, caress him… Jack swallowed heavily and shifted, just to ease the sudden pressure inside his jeans.

Bad Jack. Don’t think those thoughts. His jaw set grimly, he stared out over the hood.

“Yes, well, thanks for the lift,” Daniel said quietly, staring at about the same point in space. His own hands were nervously rubbing his thighs. “I appreciate it.”

“No sweat.”

“No, really, I…” Daniel stalled out, staying put, as if reluctant to get out of the jeep. “Thanks for… not getting rid of the house and car this time… not declaring me dead. Again.”

Jack shrugged, uneasy. “We… I knew you’d be back.”

“You did?”

“I even fed your fish. I was that sure. We kept your maid and gardening services coming, but we did put a hold on your newspaper deliveries, and we had your mail routed to the Base, but… I was sure, Daniel.”

“Why?”

“Because you always come back. Always. I know that now.”

Daniel smiled faintly. “You sound kinda pissed about it, like you wish you could get rid of me.”

“No!” Jack declared with more force than he realized, the sound of his own voice bouncing off the windshield and hitting him in the head, and making Daniel jump and swivel to stare at him. “No, Daniel. I don’t want you to think… I know things have been a little rocky between us from time to time, but honestly, truly… I’ve tried getting along without you. I don’t do so well. I don’t like it. I turn into someone… someone I don’t like when you’re not there to remind me it’s not just about
the military, not just about me, and kick me in the butt when I get too… me. There’s no one else to do that for me any more. Carter tried, she really did. She’s got that ‘don’t be an ass Jack’ look almost right, but she can’t actually say it without risking court-martial, so… Teal’c… well, Teal’c. He was more than willing to let me sink or swim on my own. And don’t even talk about Jonas. The guy couldn’t string a full sentence around me the whole time he… Guess I scared him or something. So there’s just you. I… I need you, Daniel. I need what we’ve always been to each other, from the first day.”

Daniel sat frozen, jaw dropping in shock. Then had to turn away, a blaze of hot red flooding up from his neck into his face. Daniel stole peeks at Jack, if only to compare their mutual blushes at what Jack had just… well… almost, kinda, acknowledged… knowing him as well as Daniel did, the archeologist had to know how very hard it had been for the career military, middle-aged, macho, smart-ass soldier to say even that much. Because no one knew better than Daniel that Jack sucked at this stuff.

Jack just hoped his best friend – sometimes his best enemy, but right now his best friend – knew that he wouldn’t have said as much to anyone else alive.

And, it seemed Daniel did realize, because he said, “Thank you for saying that, Jack. It means a lot to me. More than I can say.”

Jack knew he was beginning to tremble. The temptation to just reach out and pull that man to him… if he didn’t get out of here, as in right now…

“Yeah, well… got stuff to do, places to go, people to see. You take it easy, okay?”

Daniel nodded, a faint frown gathering over the bridge of his nose. “I will. See you in the morning.” He got out and stood on the sidewalk, watching Jack drive away. Jack kept an eye in the rear-view mirror on the lonely-looking figure standing on the sidewalk, feeling suddenly bereft, lonely, desolate, as he always did when he closed the door on another opportunity he was too much of a coward to take.

Daniel opened windows to air out the stuffy-smelling house. He checked the fish, removed a dead molly, and fed the rest. He went to the kitchen, opened the fridge, and sighed as he pulled out a half-bottle of wine. He poured himself a glass and took it to the back deck. He stood staring pensively into the gathering dusk, taking idle sips of wine, his expression intent, blue eyes focused on something other than the wooded ravine behind his house. Only the chill of full dark and an empty glass forced him back inside, to his darkened living room.

With a sigh, he fell back on the sofa cushions, gazing out the windows. He almost absently played with the pull of his jeans zipper, hardly noticed tugging it down, fingers fumbling with the button and then opening to reach deep for comfort…

And when he cried out at the spasm rush of his sterile, wasted orgasm, it was with Jack’s name shouted from his lips.

As he panted and his sweat-sheened skin cooled, so did the billions of tiny invisible sensors that mapped, recorded and transmitted every moment of his ecstasy, just as they mapped, recorded and transmitted…
Three identical ‘Aah!’s spread through the *Marmoset*’s control cabin, as a single, crystal tear tracked down the flushed and perfect cheek. Almost reverently, Amindara removed the new amethyst recording crystal from the hologram recorder receptacle.

It would break every heart in the Pyxyr Empire, that tear.

Amindara glanced at her two new partners and said, “We are going to make a fortune. A *fortune*.”

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End Notes

Dear folks: There you have it. Yes, there will be a sequel, 'Sleepless in (P33) C8L' (to continue the sleep deprivation rom-com theme), also stand alone, but it's only about half done, so it'll be a while before I post it. Hope you enjoyed this one.

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